INTERREGNUM APA #42

BETWEEN THE TWILIGHT AND TOMORROW!

INTERREGNUM

#42

An Amateur Press Association
exploring the worlds of
Roleplaying, Fantasy, and Science Fiction

Kiralee McCauley, Editor

Topics: **How to Reward Experience & Good Roleplaying?**
Fictional Worlds That Don't Work as Roleplaying Games

Interregnum is an APA comprised of zines written by individual contributors and sent to the editor. It is collated and published eight times a year.

New contributors and subscribers are always welcome. Just mail a check or money order, in US funds, payable to Kiralee McCauley at the address below.

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PUBLICATION SCHEDULE

➪ The Deadline for inclusion in Interregnum #43 is January 1st. The topics are **How to create an interesting PC** and **Relationships in gaming.** Interregnum #43 will be mailed around January 15th (maybe early, maybe late, depending on how well we survive prepping for Arisia, and the con itself).

➪ The Deadline for inclusion in Interregnum #44 is February 15th . The topics are **How to design a campaign** and **Oops, I did it again**. Interregnum #44 will be mailed around March 1st.

The Editor's Soapbox

Upcoming Topics:

Next Issue, Topic A: **How to create an interesting PC**
Some games seem destined to end in an arms race, as each player builds tougher and tougher characters, while more interesting possibilities are tossed aside. What makes a PC interesting? What do you need to do to build one? And how do you manage it, while still making sure they can survive? Share your tips for a particular system, or gaming in general.

Next Issue, Topic B: **Relationships in gaming**
Games don't happen in a vacuum. At the very least, they involve friends, acquaintances, and fellow gamers. How does gaming affect the way people interact? How does the way people interact affect gaming? Can gamers date non-gamers? And keep gaming? What about sexual politics between the players in a game? Is it always destructive, or can it lead to good role-playing?

Following Issue, Topic A: **How to design a campaign**
So, you want to create a long running campaign. How do you set one up? What do you have to think about beyond the first scenario? Or can you improvise at this level? What works? What doesn't? What's happened to you in the past?

Following Issue, Topic B: **Oops, I did it again**
Mistakes you keep making as a GM or player. What have you done to try and avoid them? What were the results?

Computer Update

Kiralee's software for the G4 has arrived and been installed, so we can now take Microsoft Word files in MAC format.

Art Note!

IR needs some Cover Art - COLOR Cover Art - for future issues. Brave souls should email me their efforts : joeteller@mindspring.com With an info paragraph about the art if used.

Upcoming 2001 Conventions of Note (Gaming & SF/Fantasy)

January 12th thru 14th **Arisia** Sf Convention with some gaming events.
Park Plaza Hotel, Boston MA
Email contact: moreinfo@arisia.org
Website : www.arisia.org
Mail Contact : Arisia
1 Kendall Sq.
Bldg. 600, #322
Cambridge MA 02139

January 26th thru 28th **VeriCon** : First time ever, being held by the Harvard-Radcliff Science Fiction Association on the Campus of Harvard University. Gaming & SF oriented (Heavy on the Gaming, especially Board gaming). For Sluggy Freelance Fans it's a Must!
Contact Person : Joshua VonKorff
Website: www.vericon.org
Registration $15 ($25 at the Door)
Mail Contact: Joshua VonKorff
411 Kirkland Mail Center
Cambridge, MA 02138

January 26th thru 28th **Running GAGG V : Who Let The Nuts Out?**
Gaming Convention for Gamers by Gamers.
McVitte College Union, SUNY Genesco; Rochester NY
Contact : Daniel Brace
Mail Contact : Daniel Brace
Running GAGG
170 Greystone Ln.
Rochester, NY 14618

April 21st **EconoCon V** : The Gaming Convention Anyone can afford!
Hartman Union Building, Plymouth State College
Plymouth NH
Games of All types (RPG, Board, Card, LARPS etc)
Contact : Jamie Cadorette
Mail Contact : PSC Gaming Club
19 Highland Avenue
HUB Suite A-30
Plymouth, NH 03264

November 2000

True Magick

#20

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"I call myself a writer, but I never get paid," -- Jude Cole

Introduction to Issue 20

What a long strange trip it's been. I had hoped to be writing this months ago, but due to a variety of factors I have missed more issues than I would like to admit. With any luck, I will be a more regular contributor in the future, although the demands on my time seem to be increasing.

Some interesting topics have come and gone over the last few issues. Perhaps, at some point, I will go back and write articles about a few or them. However, for now I will stick to the topics at hand ... or one of them, anyway.

Awarding experience is a major part of a GM's job. While most games have an objective system for determining such awards, there is always a subjective factor involved as well. I will have a few words to say about that in my topic article.

The other topic, fictional worlds that don't work as roleplaying, is something that I do not have enough experience with to comment on. I look forward to reading what others have to say, but I have nothing to contribute to the discussion.

Now that the *Monster Manual* is out, the Third Edition core rules for *D&D* are complete. The review section of this zine will be devoted to my impressions of the new system. Wizards of the Coast seems proud of what they have wrought ... is that justified, or are they simply blowing smoke and indulging in hyperbole? Read on to find one gamer's opinion of the changes.

I am involved in a Third Edition campaign, as a player, and I want to keep a journal of events that my character experiences. If space permits, I will begin that this time around. If not, there is always next issue ...

Are You Experienced?

One of the joys of being a game master is handing out rewards to your players. In roleplaying games, experience (or whatever system a given game uses for character advancement) is something players covet, making it especially rewarding to give out. Of course, a well-designed game should have a workable system regulating such an important aspect of the system. However, there still remains a lot of leeway for the GM. This article will look at the hows and whys of awarding experience, with a special focus on the subjective factors.

All level-based roleplaying games have (or, at least, should have) a system for rewarding experience to characters based on their actions in the game. The *D&D* system, for example, is simple ... characters get experience for killing opponents and gathering treasure. As the game has advanced through the second and now the third editions, it has tried to at least pay lip service to rewarding less tangible aspects of play, such as superior roleplaying. However, the nuts and bolts of the system still tie experience to combat and treasure.

That this is less than satisfactory should be obvious. Many game designers have tried other methods of character advancement. Skill-based systems such as *Call of Cthulhu* eschew experience altogether, instead rewarding successful skill uses by allowing a chance of improving that skill (and making it harder to improve as the skill increases). This is pretty cut-and-dried and not germane to the discussion at hand. A more modern system like *7th Sea* is more abstract than *D&D* and ties experience awards to the difficulty of the scenario (in the GM's opinion). Again, that seems inadequate. The system calls for the same award to each character, regardless of how

well or how poorly the player may have performed.

Clearly, this is where GM interpretation must come into play. In many scenarios, one or two players will be the most active in solving the problems confronting the characters, if only because their PCs possess the skills that happen to be most useful. These players may deserve a greater share of experience. However, a skillful GM will make sure that future scenarios will require skills that the other PCs have in order to balance things out. The game is less fun for all when a handful of PCs dominate play and advance faster than the rest.

Now we come to that most amorphous of categories for awarding experience: rewarding good roleplaying. Many games recommend giving bonus experience points to characters whose players roleplay particularly well in a given session; even *D&D* contains such guidelines. That last word was chosen deliberately, because guidelines are all that is usually given.

That makes sense. Good roleplaying is hard to define ("but I know it when I see it!") and depends to a great degree on the individual situation, the characters involved, and the campaign and scenario being played. What, exactly, constitutes good roleplaying? And how much should a GM reward it when he or she identifies it? These are the questions that the remainder of this article will examine.

An obvious response to the first question is that good roleplaying entails staying within the boundaries established for a given character, no matter what the situation. That is, performing an action that the character would perform even when the player knows that it might not be such a good idea. Of course, this one is so blatant that even third edition *D&D* mentions it in the section on awarding experience, but it merits discussion here.

An example will illustrate. I am playing a barbarian character in a *D&D3* (for short, to indicate that it's the new edition) campaign. In a recent game, the party was helping some Viking-types fight off an assault by a group of humanoid monsters. Mandor, my character, was in fine form, slashing about in a berserk rage. He dropped his opponent and looked for more fighting. There were two choices ... a single enemy, or a cluster of three. Being young and inexperienced, and caught up in the battle lust, he went for the group of three. I knew it meant almost certain death, but I judged that for Mandor (in his first real berserk rage) it was the only action he would even consider. He took out one of the enemies before going down under a flurry of blows. Only blatant GM intervention kept him from dying on the spot. I hope that he remembers the situation when it comes time to award experience!

There are, of course, more subtle instances where good roleplaying can occur and should be rewarded. I always give a bonus to a player who stays true to his or her character concept. So, when the elven bard Aglaca Tablefood (barely more than a teenager by eleven standards), in his quest to understand the emotion of love, creates a scene at a Duke's banquet by grabbing and kissing one of the serving wenches, he gets experience. Remind me to tell that whole tale sometime ... it is worth sharing!

Another example: in the campaign which I run as GM, Our Heroes have managed to stave off the end of the world for the moment. However, there is an installation that literally keeps the world habitable (in the distant past, their world was a lifeless moon that was terraformed; the terraforming station still exists and must keep functioning for the world to support life), and this must be protected from tampering. After the adventure was over, I asked (in the role of the king of the realm where the players reside) each of the players to submit a plan for the defense of the site. The idea is that the powers that be will study a number of plans and choose the best one, perhaps taking things from several different submissions. As of now I have not received all of the players' plans; since we're moved on to the *D&D3* campaign for the moment, it may be awhile before I do. Once they are all in, I will award experience to each PC based on how inventive his or her plan is, and how in character it is for the PC. Those who stay "in character" will receive more experience.

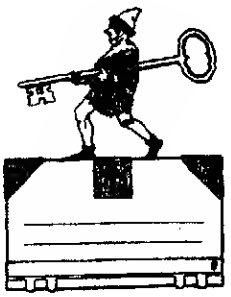
I guess that, for me, this is the essence of what I consider to be good roleplaying. Giving a character a believable personality and then having him act in accordance with that personality is what I look for and reward when I see it. Speaking in funny voices and using archaic language is not necessarily part of this definition (although a distinctive voice can be a nice touch). I also do not require Aglaca's player to

dance and sing when the bard is performing his act. Mike has written a number of songs as Aggie, and simply reciting them is sufficient. Of course, if the player actually were a talented singer and wanted to do so, that would be fine as well ... but would not earn him any more experience.

And how much experience is good roleplaying worth? Most experience-point-based games bave a concrete way of measuring character accomplishment, from the hack and slash *D&D* method of monster kills and treasure gathering to *7th Sea*'s mission-based tally. That sort of thing is objective ... a vampire is worth a specific number of experience points in *D&D*, and a given scenario in *7th Sea* garners each player experience based on its difficulty. Some GM interpretation is necessary from time to time in weighing the powers of the PCs against the difficulty of the monster or task, but the experience is pretty much cut-and-dried.

Good roleplaying, on the other hand, is a purely subjective concept. What works for me, as outlined above, might not suffice for another GM. Once the concept is identified for a given GM, there are few guidelines as to how to reward it with experience points. *D&D3* includes a paragraph recommending a small award for outstanding roleplaying, "just large enough for the player to notice," and sets an arbitrary ceiling of 50 points per character level per adventure. That hardly seems sufficient for what is, after all, a *roleplaying* game. One might think that one should value playing the role over merely overcoming obstacles and reaping monetary rewards ...

In my campaign, I find that I rarely give experience for treasure gained. Also, I use the xp value for monsters and opposing character types as only a starting point. The bulk of my experience awards comes from roleplaying. PCs wbo perform their tasks in a way that entertains me will get more points (I admit it ... I'm biased in that way!) Equally important is whether or not the player is true to the established personality and proclivities of her character. If Canan, the shy and scholarly mage, suddenly grabs a staff and wades into battle trying to basb the vampire's head in, something's wrong. That much should be obvious; but what if Canan, who is so fascinated by magic that he has never learned the spell Dispel Magic ("who would want to?") starts to deliberately destroy magic items? A bit more subtle,



but just as out of character. And if Canan ever actually did those things, I would wonder what was wrong with Jennifer, to play him that way! In either case, there would be no reason to award xp for role-playing as her PC is not acting true to character.

This brings up another point. If one is to reward good roleplaying, is the converse also true? Does one then penalize inferior roleplaying? To go back to the above example, let's say that Jennifer has Canan go toe-to-toe with the vampire (and the mage survives the encounter). Next the PCs learn that the vampire was a mage and find his spellbooks, which Canan promptly sets on fire and destroys. What is a GM to do? The menace has been defeated, and *D&D* rules call for experience to be awarded. But Jennifer has not played Canan according to the way she has developed the character over the last few years. Should she be penalized?

That is a difficult proposition. *D&D3*, and I would assume most games as well, advocates never penalizing players for character behavior. In theory, I would bave to agree. If there is a problem with the player suddenly not playing the character consistent with the established persona, it is best to talk with that player outside the game. Perhaps she has a reason why the PC is acting strangely; perhaps she got caught up in the excitement of the moment and didn't even realize that what she was having her character do was "wrong" for that character. As GM, I would penalize the player indirectly, by awarding fewer experience points to ber character than to others who stayed true to their persona ... unless the player came up with a darned good explanation!

Awarding experience for roleplaying well is one of those judgement calls that a GM has to make. There is no single right way to do it. As long as the GM is consistent and his system is acceptable to the players in his campaign, then that system is good for that group. Being fair and not arbitrary is the key.

Games, Books, & Stuff

One Man's Opinions

Dungeons & Dragons Third Edition roleplaying game by Monte Cook, Jonathan Tweet and Skip Williams. Three hardcover books (*Players Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual*. Wizards of the Coast, 2000. $20 each.

Whether one is a fan of the *Dungeons and Dragons* game or not, it is hard to deny that the publication of a major overhaul of this venerable roleplaying system is a major event for the hobby. *D&D* is the most played roleplaying game in the world. When non-roleplayers think about this genre, *D&D* is the game that they think of first. Even those players who disdain the system very likely cut their roleplaying teeth on this game before moving on to other games. For all these reasons, and more, *D&D Third Edition (D&D3 for short)* is a significant new chapter in the history of roleplaying games.

Years in the making, tested by a veritable army of playtesters, *D&D3* breaks out of the mold established by its predecessors. While it bears definite similarities to the original game, the new version is different enough to really be considered a new game. Unlike the second edition, which was virtually identical in gameplay to the first edition, *D&D3* offers some major changes to the rules. Whether these changes are for the better, whether they are enough to warrant switching a long-running campaign to the new system, and whether they are likely to expand the hobby by attracting new players, will be the focus of this review.

At the very least, something had to be done to bring this game system up to modern standards. After all, *D&D* had been mostly unchanged since the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* game was first published in 1979. 20-plus years had seen a lot of advances in game design. *AD&D* was light-years behind the state of the art for the hobby, even in its Second Edition (which was hardly on the cutting edge even at the time of its publication). *D&D3* brings to the table some concepts that are long overdue for this system.

The most basic building blocks of *D&D3* will be familiar to anyone who has encountered the previous versions of the system. Characters still have the same six attributes as before (strength, intelligence, dexterity, wisdom, constitution, and charisma), and the basic range is still 3-18. All the familiar PC races are in evidence, and half-orcs are back after having been removed in the Second Edition. The system remains class-based; the usual suspects return, along with a few new classes that are recognizable variations on the old ones. The classes still progress through experience levels as the characters accrue experience points, and choose from the familiar (and often maligned) alignments ranging from lawful good to chaotic evil.

While there is much that is familiar, much more has changed. The most significant difference is the use of a universal mechanic to resolve uncertain outcomes. The system uses a roll of a 20-sided die for virtually every situation (with the exception of combat damage), and has been cleverly named "the d20 system." Unlike earlier editions of the game, rolling high is always an advantage in this system (the skill system in previous versions required low rolls to succeed). This is a welcome change, making things much more consistent. Now, the Dungeon Master sets a Difficulty Class for a particular action. The player rolls a d20 and adds his character's relevant bonuses; if the total equals or exceeds the DC set by the DM, the action succeeds.

That mechanic works in all situations. Skill use becomes very simple, as the PC's rank in a given skill (along with any bonuses due to high attributes related to the skill) becomes the modifier to the d20 roll. Extensive guidelines are given to help the DM determine the DC for most situations. This is a major improvement. In particular, opposed rolls are a snap now. Does Foedor the thief want to sneak past a guard? His player rolls his skill check, while the guard rolls a "spot" check; the DCs are determined by such things as precautions taken by the PC and the alertness of the guard as determined by the DM. Should the player succeed while the NPC fails, the thief sneaks by. If it's the other way around, Foedor is in big trouble. If both fail, or both

succeed, the amount by which they do determines what happens. I like the way this works.

Combat is also easier to resolve. Gone is the concept of "THACO" that underlay the earlier versions, because the armor class system has been utterly revamped so that "To Hit Armor Class 0" no longer has meaning in the system. Instead of running backwards, getting lower as armor improves so that negative numbers are best, armor class is now handled much more logically. AC still starts at 10 for an unarmored character, but now it gets higher as the character adds armor. Each type of armor adds a certain number to the AC (for example, studded leather improves AC by three), so that a higher AC means that the character is better armored. This translates directly to combat, since the DC of an attack roll is the target's armor class. Roll a d20, add in the attacker's bonuses, and if the total equals or exceeds the defender's AC, you've scored a hit.

The new system streamlines combat quite a bit. And since combat is still a major component of the *D&D* game, this is a huge improvement. The movement system is also easier to use. Rather than being given in inches, which the players had to translate into tens of feet (indoors) or tens of yards (outdoors), movement rates are now 30 feet for most characters. In combat, this allows a character to move that far and still take an action. Much less confusing than the old system. Also, a combat round no longer represents an unrealistic full minute of sparring. In *D&D3* the round is six seconds. This change results in much more believable battles, and makes it significantly easier to visualize what is happening when opposing sides square off.

There is much more to the new combat system. Moving recklessly around during a battle provokes attacks of opportunity, for one, and is now a very bad idea. Characters who get surrounded are now at a very significant disadvantage. The whole system is much more tactical than before, and is almost impossible to effectively resolve without using miniature figures. This is not necessarily an improvement in my book, as I prefer a more free-form version of combat. However, when properly run *D&D3* combat should be clear and definite, with little room for arguments.

The magic system is less significantly changed. For the most part, spellcasters still need to memorize spells in advance, and once cast the spell is forgotten until memorized again, although there are exceptions. Bards and the new sorcerer class use different rules. They will know fewer spells, but can cast any spell that they know at any time, within the limits of the number of spells per day available to their level. Priest characters can convert any of their memorized spells to healing spells of the same level if they wish. The spell saving throw chart is gone. The Difficulty Class that a spell's target needs to beat depends on the spell level, the level of the caster, and the modifier for the caster's relevant prime ability (intelligence for wizards, wisdom for clerics, charisma for bards and sorcerers). I love this change, as it always seemed absurd that it was as easy to save against a 20th-level mage's charm person spell as it was to save against a first-level caster. Now a more powerful mage's spells are more difficult to save against, which is as it should be.

Again, there are a whole slew of other changes to the magic system. Lower level characters can cast more spells now, with the addition of 0-level spells that are more effective when used creatively than the phrase "zero-level" might imply. Also, all magic-using classes get bonus spells for bigh attributes, not just priests. Finally, the spell lists have been shuffled a bit, altering what classes get to cast which spells.

The *Monster Manual* also reflects the changes that run throughout the new system. Most monsters get the same attributes as do characters, with the same bonuses for high attributes. In addition, monsters can progress through "higher levels" just like PCs. This gives the DM great flexibility in designing encounters suitable to the power of the PCs. A nice touch indeed. Perhaps the best feature in the *D&D3 Monster Manual* is the addition of templates for certain creatures, making it a snap to customize major nasties such as lycanthropes and vampires.

The new *Dungeon Master's Guide* features lots of goodies for the DM's use. One I particularly like is that what were formerly "0-level" characters in earlier editions now have some teeth. Non-adventuring NPCs now have classes of their own, and if they can never be as proficient as the "adventuring" classes they are now much more formidable and distinctive. I like this a lot. The book is also chock-full of advice for the beginning DM, always a plus.

Some things are less intriguing. The "prestige classes" presented in the *DMG* don't do much for me. Open to Player Characters of 5th level and above, prestige classes add new abilities to the PC. Player characters in this game are powerful enough without gaining the abilities of these class variations as they advance. If one wants to make a PC more distinctive it is always better to do it through roleplaying than through adding even more abilities.

Overall, this is a much better game system than the earlier editions. While still far from perfect, it's less arbitrary and confusing now than it ever was. But (and you had to know that there was a "but" coming), is it new and improved enough to cause existing players to convert, and to attract hordes of new players to our hobby?

Alas, that may not be the case. Looking at conversion first, I see that it will be very difficult for existing campaigns to change over to the new rules. Character abilities and levels are different enough in *D&D3* that a lot of work has to be done to make the changes. Anyone contemplating doing it should expect their PCs to take some serious hits to their abilities and levels. In particular, multi-class characters come out big losers. In the new system, any character can be multi-classed; upon advancing a level, simply choose to start a new class at first level rather than increasing the level of the existing class. As long as the levels of the two classes are advanced at similar rates, so they remain close, there are no serious penalties. But when one class level starts to pull away from the other, major experience penalties are levied (with a few exceptions, based on "favored classes" for each race; as long as one class is the race's favored class the levels can vary greatly with no penalties).

In theory, this is a simpler and more streamlined system than the previous versions. However, PCs from 1st or 2nd editions who are already multi-classed will lose a tremendous amount of power when converted to *D&D3*. That is very unfair, and is alone almost enough to stop people from converting existing PCs to the new system. It's a lot of work, and the payoff is a letdown. Therefore, most gamers switching from earlier editions to *D&D3* will have to start entirely new campaigns, and that is a lot to ask. Also, there are a lot of little niggling changes in terminology (particularly spell names) that add nothing to the game. Why "detect lie" became "discern lie," among dozens of other small changes, is beyond me. Nitpicking, I know, but annoying to someone who has been playing the game for 21 years.

As for attracting new players, I think that *D&D3* might be less than successful there as well. The books, while handsomely presented, are atrociously written. Repetition is the order of the day. For example, wearing heavy armor reduces the effectiveness of several skills. The same paragraph listing which skills are affected is repeated for each of the eleven character classes. Why? Wouldn't it make more sense to list the affected skills once, at the beginning of the skills chapter? And make a note at the beginning of the chapter on character classes, referring to the list? After all, the fact that there is an armor check penalty is clearly noted in the description of each affected skill ... there is no need to repeat the same information 11 times.

The quality of the writing is also quite weak. Reading the *Player's Handbook* chapter on feats, a new character facet that allows players to customize their PCs by choosing from an extensive list of abilities, is painful. The word "feat" is repeated so many times that my head was spinning after just the first paragraph! Did anybody edit this thing? Again, this is nitpicking, but it is important - especially for players trying to learn a new system. If the writing style gets in the way of the learning process, as it does here, there is a problem.

Bottom line? I'm ambivalent. I like a lot of the new ideas here, but *D&D3* has some serious weaknesses. I'm enjoying playing it, so I guess that should count for something ... Grade: C+

Comments

No time or space ... sorry ... I'll catch up later.

THE SWASHBUCKLING MAGE RIDES AGAIN #13

"When Muses talk we listen...
even at 3 AM on a Tuesday."

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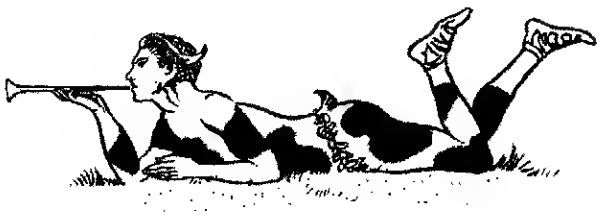


Personal Notes:

Hopefully with this issue IR will again be back on schedule, and Kiralee will have returned to the helm (we'll see - if this statement contradicts anything in the editorial pages, you can rest assured that the Editorial pages are correct as they are the last thing written for each issue of IR).

We've had a busy month and it looks to continue that way. Work is still asking too much of Kiralee's time, I've had a short bout with the flu, our clothes dryer died after 14 years of service to the building, the three household birthdays have come and passed, our phone service has changed from one megacorp to another (from Verizon to AT&T), gone from analog to digital cable service, and by the time you read this I'll have faced some new dental surgery, suffered thru some unrelated medical tests, began planning for Arisia etc,

Kiralee, Cindy and I have all been asked to attend Arisia as panelists this year. I'm trying to put together promotional material for the convention, get *Cosmic Synchronicity* ready for distribution and working on Valdormari, a world setting for Cosmic. We're also involved in official playtesting for *Ironclaw* supplemental books.

The Guildsman

If you haven't dropped by our website (www.fantasylibrary.com) recently then you probably haven't seen that we are now the online home to electronic pdf format back issues of *The Guildsman* which is published & edited by *Interregnum*'s Jim Vassilakos. (They are located in the Periodicals Room).

Jim was kind enough to also send me a paper copy of the latest issue (#7, Fall 2000 date) and I thought I'd share at least a few observations on it with folks here. Its published quarterly, primarily in PDF format for free online, but a paper edition is available for $16 a year ($4 an issue). Issue #7 ran about 60 pages in glorious B&W, and the layout is much in the same style as Jim uses for his zines in IR.

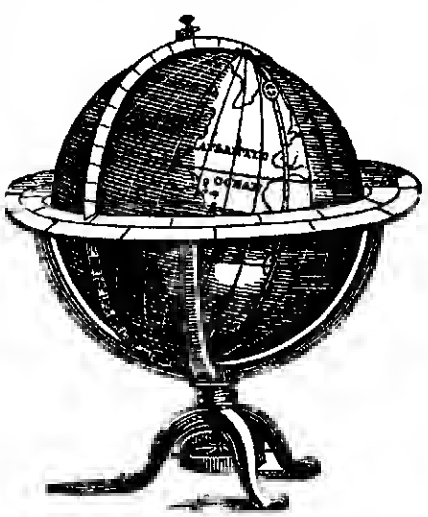
Jim is evidently looking for article submissions, and will give a courtesy copy of an issue any material you write appears in. The Guildsman is mostly oriented to AD&D, and so the interest in regards to articles is mostly for material for that system and generic material that can be adapted easily to any fantasy related game. For a generic example, this issue contains Peter Maranci's *Gamemaster's Hall of Shame.*

Although the publication does center heavily on AD&D related material, there is in this issue a world for the Traveller system by Peter Trevor (though I wasn't able to tell which version of Traveller it was intended) and a review of the Tenchi Muyo! RPG. Jim also wrote a very nice section at the end of the issue overview of the various other roleplaying magazines, fanzines and apas that are currently being published.

Included in this issue is Jim's extensive article on the History & Analysis of TSR's copyright policies over the years (previously published in *A&E*) which can be very insightful if you're not familiar with the events over the past few decades in regards to the publishers of D&D.

The adventures, rule supplements and setting enhancement pieces included in the issue all appear to be well written and useful for the system(s) they are intended.

Generally I'd recommend folks who use AD&D or Traveller should download a copy from the web and enjoy. Jim's done a good job and hopefully the Guildsman will continue on for years to come as a new source of roleplaying pleasure for gamers.



Comments On IR #41

Zine Without A Name : Glad to hear that you folks found more spacious accommodations. I hope that the new bookcases are more sturdy than the old ones (I was always scared of the ones in your old condo bedroom would collapse if any of the books were moved).//Your cat character sounds like he was a lot of fun for you to play, and I'm sorry I wasn't able to get involved when he was in play. I hope to maybe eventually make some of the Saturday games at MIT regularly once we get past the usual rough time of Thanksgiving thru Arisia that we are facing with our schedules.

Swashbuckling Mage : Apologies to all for my typos and occasional poor grammar - having to play acting editor has made my time schedule very difficult at times.

Real McCoy : As always your short stories and vignettes are welcome inclusions. Now if only we convince *She who must rule Absolutely* to allow you time for comments.... ☺

Refugee : I can understand why **Detour** was a prize winner, its definitely the sort of antagonist winning by scientific know-how story that fans of hard sf enjoy. Good Job.

Flutterblast : Although your piece on heroism and character modes in novels and rpgs has a certain amount of truth to it, I don't think it really covers all the possibilities in my experiences. I'm currently in an Elizabethan GURPS campaign that runs weekly that does not have players & characters that fit your 6 types exactly. Some are a mix of several of your categories, and others fail to fit any of

them really. There is no real vying to be the main character among the players, nor has there been a great need for the GM to rein-in anyone to a great extent in regards to what they are trying to get away with. Everyone has their own little political circles, most have their time playing the hero in some way (though combat has been VERY limited), all have their comedic moments and everyone is an instigator trying to help create new directions and possibilities (but very little in the way of trying to exploit mechanics, mostly getting each other to entwine activities so no one ends up much in solo play for too long. Even more so they act as instigator to open up new plot possibilities for the GM to play with or insert his own ideas into.) Then again, this particular group is considered very unusual by many folks I've spoken with, since the players are mostly female (5 women and 2 men, plus 1 male GM), and nearly all the player characters are male (2 female characters, one of which spends all her time disguised as a male gentleman). It's also developed a reputation locally because of its clothing-optional gaming nights, complex personal relationships and unusual sexual orientations within the game and among the players. The group has also had a much lower turn-over rate than many of the groups I've been involved in over the years. People join but rarely depart (unlike say my Sunday playtest group, which had 6 players come and go over a year and a half that just didn't fit in with the core group style or interests).

Words on the Wing : Your convention report was reasonably extensive, my only complaint is with the photos. Once again they just didn't reproduce well, either because of problems with your inkjet printer or problems with the scanner. Maybe its time to clean the nozzles, or to consider getting a higher resolution scanner? Or maybe it would work better if you took the photos in B&W originally instead of color? ❀ Thanks for showing some of the horrible flaws in the new *D&D* system, which gives me all the more reasons not to bother ever getting a copy for any reason. ❀ Diablo II is good if you like a hack-n-slash computer game, sort of a sophisticated graphical version of *Hack* or *Moria* or *Rogue* with multi-player capability. Online its main flaw is that it is insufficiently supported by the Battlenet servers, often meaning that it can be impossible to get in to a game for days, and that it has problems with lost connections on a regular basis. Hardcore characters are nearly impossible to play, according to Mike Yoder, because of these server problems on the part of the Battlenet site. If they would just fix these problems it might be worth the large amounts of time needed to get a character to a reasonable level of ability. Thanks for all your comments on it.

The Parliament of Dreams : Glad to have you back, IR needs as many folks as it can get to be involved. Games Unplugged is basically unavailable around here, so I've never seen a copy on paper, just the website. ✻ I think we will have to agree to disagree on the subject of cinematic as we are working with different variations. I don't see Cinematic as Honk-Kong Action flicks. It's like my arguments about "what is Pulp?" with folks who have never read an original Shadow or Doc Savage story and instead base their opinion on bad movie knock-offs. To me, Indiana Jones is not an undefeatable, over-the-top hero. He's a rugged survivor who regularly ends up a mass of scar tissue or bleeding wounds. He loses part or all of his goals or possessions along the way in order to save his friends or preserve the world from evil. Simplistic mechanics are not intended for long term campaigns or depth. I like depth and longevity, so not simplistic mechanics.

Joe's Reading Pile

I just have a few *Books of Worth* to cover this time, mostly the result of my being stuck in a weakened state from a bout with the flu a few weeks ago that let me do some reading.

The Queen's Head
by Edward Marston

I have our friend Elisabeth Riba to thank for this one. It may be a bit hard to find (first published in 1989 for the US edition), but is worth the search. Set in the late days of Queen Elizabeth, it's a mystery story set around a theater group, Lord Westfield's Men, with a large amount of intrigue and insight into the world of the theater in the time of the Spanish Armada.

If fairly accurate historical fiction is something you can enjoy, this will definitely fill the bill. The characters and events are enjoyable and the twist at the end is worth the time. At roughly 208 pages it's a short easy read for most folks. I definitely recommend it.

The Truth
by Terry Pratchett

It's the twenty-fifth Discworld novel, and times are changing in Anhk-Morpork as the first printing press arrives in company of a collection of enterprising dwarves. The patrician is skeptical of the idea, until he realizes that Mr. Dibbler is NOT involved and they have NOT set up shop over an interdimensional rift or on top of an ancient temple's remains or inside a forgotten grave yard. He decides that the press may indeed have some value, especially to his own concepts of what it might have uses for in the long term.

Actually very few of the regular characters of the series are directly involved, although they all make cameos and side appearances.

William de Worde, a struggling scribe and lesser son of a noble family, is the main character of the tale. Before the coming of the press he gathers information on various activities in the city and passes it on to a handful of notables in foreign lands who are interested in things like local politics, assassinations and prices on various commodities. He becomes the first newspaper publisher in the city, his little newsletter becoming a broadsheet for not just a handful of the elite, but for the masses.

This puts him at odds with the Engravers Guild, The City Watch, disgruntled folks who didn't like what the newspaper said about them, and certain "concerned citizens" who have formed a committee to un-elect the patrician.

It's a classic Pratchett romp of parody, humor and looking at stereotypes that we were all brought up with, along with all the classic questions about who watches the watchers, and exactly what is truth anyway?

I think it's better than his previous novel, *The Fifth Elephant*, and far less predictable in many ways that make the book not just funny but makes one think about the world in general.

Under The Game Manager's Hat

One of the tools of a good Game Manager that is often ignored or forgotten, but which can truly make the task of keeping a collection of player characters cooperating and vaguely on track of the ongoing plots, is that of the Allied Supporting Character (ASC).

Allied Supporting Characters are characters which the GM portrays that are integral and valuable members of the party of characters, which fill a niche that is not occupied by a player character in regards to function, and which in personality can be considered friendly, helpful, cooperative or at least talkative and inventive.

The GM can also use them as a nudge at times within game play to help keep events moving when things bog down or when the player's characters are spending too much time arguing among themselves to get things actually done. They are a catalyst, when necessary, possibly taking the needed "leap of faith" when none of the players are being brave enough. They can also be the "voice of common sense" when things are getting too silly or when the players are getting horribly sidetracked.

I often use Allied Supporting Characters that fill the niche of group instigator, sometimes being the reason why the characters are involved in a plot, and other times simply as the reliable transportation source that ensures that the characters will actually be able to get together to achieve whatever the goal is.

A prime example from past games of this last idea is the character that Cindy & Kiralee have spoken of in some articles previously, D'Val the teleporting sharg, who can teleport multiple characters with him while traveling to individual persons by following their scent anywhere in the world and into other dimensions. A secondary example would be Crystal, a helicopter pilot smuggler/diplomatic courier from my Earth Unmasked campaign, who often is the one who calls her friends in to help another friend in trouble.

Another example, in a different vein, is William "Wild Bill" Rosencrantz, who originated as a character for Mystic Earth (an alternative 1990s setting where magic was alive and well) and who has also made appearances in other Alternative Earth settings, slightly different each time. He's always some sort of paranormal investigator, has a love for attiring himself in antique clothing and equipping himself with ancient weapons that somehow always prove more useful than some of the more modern ones. He often acts as instigator, sometimes as a temporary party leader (but in a very loose handed way to encourage one of the players to take over).

The important thing for a GM using this concept is NEVER to take over the stage with the ASC for any length of time, and try to make sure that the only way the situation/problem can be dealt with or solved is thru player character actions and decisions.

The ASC is not a deux ex machina, and never should be. You can use the character to mentally bump the players over the head when they are abandoning common sense, or to offer

them a direction to go in that they have been ignoring, but you can't use the character to force the players into a path of action or make them follow some self-determined plot.

If, as GM, you insist that the plot must follow a linear path that only leads to the end point that you have in mind, then you should stop GMing and become a writer of novels. Roleplaying must include a certain amount of player freedom, an ability to step outside the possibilities the GM has planned and the capability to improvise in situations. Maybe, once a long time ago, in the early dawn of such games, there was a place for the linear, controlled storyline and plot, but roleplaying has really reached well beyond that in the past 25 years. Don't use allied supporting characters to return to this dead-end in gaming.

It's important that ASC should be a little larger than life, so that they stand out in the minds of the characters, and so that the players desire to keep them around as friends.They should also have a moral code of conduct that they hold themselves and who they associate to. This is important, because sometimes the only power that the ASC in a situation is to threaten to walk away from the characters when they are taking a path that the character would feel is unreasonable.

It's best that the ASC is built with a few contacts that the other player character's don't know at start, and is sometimes privy to information that they don't have, so that the ASC will always remain a valuable resource in some way, long after the player characters may have surpassed really needing the character for their niche.

Having several ASC's can ensure variety in the cast of characters around the players, and can also sometimes allow new directions when a campaign is getting slow or feeling like it has stagnated to players.

I tend to have a number of such ASC's in the wings in most campaigns, to weave into the story line depending on where the players direct events. This allows one to introduce subplots, romances, and complex relationships between the ASC's and the various player characters. Sometimes even an ASC may become a rival or villain in a particular plotline, if they have been scorned, treated badly or taken for granted by the players. This gives player characters a good incentive for them to treat better any other ASC's to avoid a repeat problem caused by callousness on the player's part.

A Good ASC should not always be available for players to use as a resource, or they will not reach their full potential in devising solutions.

If they know that they can always expect their good friend Wanda the ASC to hack into the antagonist's computer and find them important clues, then they won't do legwork themselves that might provide interesting insight, clues not in the computer or encounters that would make the storyline more meaningful. If they know that D'val can always follow a scent to someone, then they will simply always try to get something with the villain's scent on it and teleport in on them to attack with surprise. If they know that Bill the conspiracy expert and paranormal investigator will always figure out what they are fighting and what its vulnerabilities are, then they will never experiment and never do any research themselves.

So, I always make sure all the ASC's have flawed abilities that are useful but not constant. Thus they can be used quickly and easily when its useful to move along the action quickly, but that they won't always have them at their beck and call when you as GM want to make the players work more at achieving a specific goal.

Its like the classic concept of rolling dice for situations where the element of chance is important to the story. Its not important if you burned your toast at breakfast, it is important if you burnt the dinner you were making to prove your skills as a chef to a new boss.

Wanda can't always find out how to get into the villains computers, sometimes they require someone to go there to access them, and Wanda is in a wheelchair that does not have a "stealth mode".

Crystal may have trouble dealing with customs, or need to make a courier run for a government official, or her helicopter may be in for repairs from the damage inflicted on it in the last adventure.

D'Val can lose a scent, or end up missing his target, or even accidentally lose people (the more people he teleports with, the more likely he'll be leaving folks behind or stranded on some alien world).

Bill gets things mixed up, and sometimes can't tell one conspiracy group from another and gives bad information, and sometimes vanishes for months on end as he pursues a particularly valuable antique for his collection or accidentally switches places with one of his alternative earth opposites who doesn't know the characters at all or who is too busy trying to get switched back rather than help them.

Players who feel 100% secure that the story will work out without them expending some heavy thought, effort or emotion, are players who will become bored and won't give their all in the game. Security should not be automatic, a good GM should always leave some doubt that things will work out, even with the players involvement of their characters. And, in that doubt, players should be sure that the actions of their characters and the ASC's must be as a team, that if they fail to act or leave it just to the ASC to do, things will often NOT work out and result in a bigger problem for them to deal with later.

This doesn't mean everything needs to be up to random chance, it means that as GM you need to delegate when it is important for the ASC to be unavailable and when its expedient to have them jump in, do their thing, and lead the player's characters into the next interesting possibility.

ASC's also should be more active and important in campaigns where you have only a small number of players, as the roles they fill may be more important. When my games only had 3 players, there were always 2-3 ASC's in close proximity to the player characters that could be called on, when my gaming group grew larger I toned down their visibility and importance to the group, as well as their shear numbers. This is to ensure not taking too much valuable stage time away from players.

If you have players that regularly split up the party for various functions, ASC's also act in a useful manner for the GM, as they can often be the communication characters that will report back events if the player characters become injured, captured or killed from their activities.

When players split up their party regularly into small pieces, having ASC's that can accompany the various smaller groups moves the ASC back into a more important support position and influence tool for the GM.

So, it is important for a GM to utilize the tool of the Allied Supporting Character and to understand the need to design such to fit the specific collection of player characters to avoid stepping into the role niches that the players are filling themselves.

Allied Supporting Characters should be distinctive, but not overwhelming, valuable but not omnipotent or irreplaceable. In play they should be used as support, not tools of control. They should not be used as "the GM's player character" in the group, so they don't upstage the players or control too much of the stage. They should not make or break the campaign by their presence or absence, though you can use them as an important "hook" in a particular plot line. It should be remembered that they can be more active when in smaller parties or when the players inevitably split the party into smaller groups going in different directions.

On The Gaming Industry

The gaming industry has been going thru a lot of changes, like many industries, in the past year. ICE has gone bankrupt (forced into it by Tolkein Enterprises) after having their licensing for Middle Earth canceled by Tolkein Enterprises, just as that company finally is producing the movie that they had been promising ICE was "coming soon" that was the justification for charging them such high prices on the license for all along on. (With Hasbro/WOTC getting the license and the profit in the long term).

WOTC has, apparently, convinced a number of game companies to jump on the band wagon of their new D20 system (even though their so-called open-gaming license has yet to be finalized and literally is changed monthly to WOTC's advantage). These companies include long term players, such as Chaosium and Eden Studios, and I just hope that they've gotten everything in writing and checked all the small print. (I just don't trust Hasbro, with its litigious track record, not to be using all this as a way to wipe out the competition by tricking it.)

Finally there is the internet companies eating up roleplaying game companies (like Pinnacle) offering nifty stock deals to swallow up their content, and to perhaps make computer game versions. Thing is, many of these dot.com companies have stock that is dropping like a stone with no sign or profits. This could be very risky business.

It looks like gaming is ceasing to be fan driven, and more money/business driven, and that's bad for all of us. Sigh.

Firestarter Zwanzig

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Just as most issues are seldom black or white, so are most good solutions seldom black or white.
Beware of the solution that requires one side to be totally the loser and the other side to be totally the winner.
The reason there are two sides to begin with usually is because neither side has all the facts.
Therefore, when the wise mediator effects a compromise, he is not acting from political motivation.
Rather, he is acting from a deep sense of respect for the whole truth.
-- Stephen R. Schwambach

Never mind what others didn't do. It's what you do that counts.

-- net fortune cookie

Hello, fellow IR participants. This note is my best shot to communicating as clearly as possible some of the reasons behind my resignation from the APA zine Interregnum.

In my *Firestarter #18* zine I replied to **Dale Meier's** zine re **having Christian themes in one's games**. My intent was to suggest that, while GMing, one should exercise *extreme* caution when implementing personal beliefs in one's game -- especially if those personal beliefs are not necessarily shared by everyone in the game. I tried to be sure that it was a balanced zine, in that it did not accuse anyone of anything, and I tried to make my statements clearer by using gaming examples from my life.

In Dale's reply I saw (quite possibly erroneously, of course) a certain defensiveness. This led me to worry -- had he felt I'd attacked him? If so, I'd certainly failed in my attempt to reasonably communicate and discuss this issue via zine.

A few months later on the web I happened to stumble across the journal of the person I used as an example in my zine. Since I do not respect this person very much I was not terribly disturbed to discover they *hated* my zine. However, it was the comment of a friend that knows her that made me take pause. His comment was, "Well, you do seem to dislike Christians an awful lot, Collie."

I was a little shocked at this statement, since I don't consider it true. I had to stop and think, to try to figure out why he'd say such a thing. It was but the work of a moment to discuss this issue with my friend, since we were face to face; to both better understand what he meant, and to clarify my position. Succinctly, it is not Christians I don't care for. I know several intelligent and thoughtful Christians, just as I know several believers in Wicca, Buddhism, and Islam whom I find interesting, mentally challenging, and/or inspiring. What bothers me is people who either expect or allow others to think for them. I have no respect for people like that, regardless of whether their parameter of mental laziness is ivory tower elitism, religiosity, or any other speculative framework designed to assign responsibility for their lives to anyone but themselves.

However, while my friend and I were able to reasonably discuss this and clear the issue up, a nagging thought remained -- to whom else had I accidentally given unpleasant and erroneous impressions? Bigotry, in *any* form, disturbs me greatly... and equally disturbing was the thought that I'd somehow convinced folks that I was a bigot when it came to Christianity.

I've been giving this problem quite a bit of thought, and this is part of the reason I've had no zines for the last few issues of IR. Currently I've not yet resolved how to handle this, but I do feel extremely unhappy at the thought that my comments might have caused folks (Christian or otherwise) in IR to feel uncomfortable about writing zines or unwelcome in IR.

This is one of the reasons why I've decided to resign from IR. It's my hope that with my departure any awkwardness, and the quiet attrition of contributors, will be removed as well.

Let me be clear on one last point, however. I'd like to offer a sincere thank you to all the IR participants. I've very much enjoyed the writings and discussions for/in IR up to this point, and I'm truly sorry if my writings caused anyone to feel unwelcome in IR. Also, if anyone has any further questions or comments please feel free to email me at my new email address: collie@pobox.com.

He that would make his own liberty secure, must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty, he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.

-- Thomas Paine (1737-1809)

The Sign Of The Dancing Priestess #11

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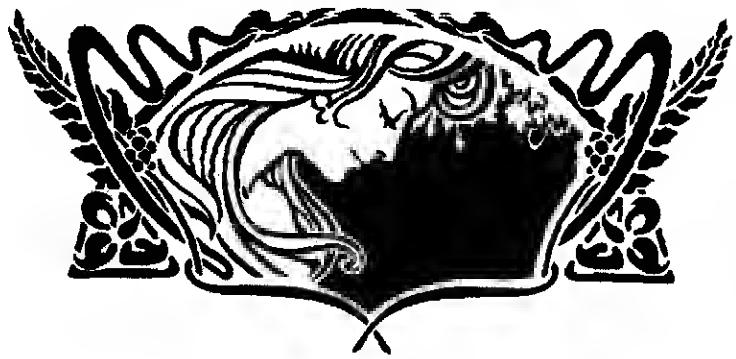

Personal Notes

First, let me apologize for my long absence. I hope everyone will forgive me for taking so long to comment on their writing. (No? What if I promise to comment on two issues per zine until I catch up?) Seriously, it's good to be back, typing on my nice new computer with the spiffy big screen.

Other than that I'm not doing much. It's the winter season, time to curl up inside and hibernate until spring. I'm kicking around the idea for a campaign – a modern supernatural piece set in India – but right now it's just a research project. I'm trying to figure out what system to use and find out enough about the Hindu religion to know if the basic concept works. I'll probably end up having to design my own mechanics.

Everyone Has A Little Experience

A long, long time ago experience was pretty simple. You killed things, you found treasure, you got eps. But people weren't satisfied. Sometimes they wanted to do something besides kill things and get treasure. So then, you got eps for accomplishing goals, or other objective, in game, actions, like casting spells if you were a wizard. No one ever came up with the perfect set of rules that worked for everyone. One group did one thing, another something else. Most people were happy.

Along the way, someone came up with the idea of giving out experience for 'good roleplaying.' A lot of people liked it. Soon, it became pretty standard, and now almost every system includes it as one way to gain experience.

I can understand why it's popular. It lets the GM encourage good behavior from the players, like roleplaying disadvantages. In some cases a GM could also discourage disruptive behavior, by giving out fewer points for good roleplaying than usual. Rather than grading the success or failure of the character's actions, experience point systems came to focus in part on grading the players actions.

All very well and good, but a couple of things got left out: For example, the definition of good roleplaying; Or GMs giving eps instead of specific feedback; Or the players opinions of what behavior they want to encourage; Or, a means of 'grading' the GM – after all the work the GM puts in, don't they deserve a few experience points?

Actually, defining good roleplaying isn't that hard to do. Most gamers have a pretty good idea what this is, or at least they can point to it when they see, and they pretty much all end up pointing at the same thing. It tends to have style, and flair, to define the character played in some way and either require, or create, a lot of stage time for the player. Unfortunately, I don't entirely agree with the definition.

My biggest problem is the interaction between good roleplaying and stage time. First the player is encouraged by getting to play a lot, and usually by having something interesting to do. Then, to top it off, they're rewarded with extra experience points. It's worse when the system is competitive. At worst one player will dominate – the more they dominate, they more their character can do, so the more their character dominates, getting even more experience. It doesn't even have to be intentional on the player's part.

For myself, I tend not to react well to this. I don't get encouragement when I want it. Then I get into the game, and start wanting to encourage other people. Instead of seeing them get eps, so they can build up their characters and have a chance to do something, I get rewarded.

Currently both games I'm playing in give out experience, roughly speaking, for good roleplaying on a competitive basis. I've responded in one by refusing the experience points, and am about to do the same thing in the other. It wasn't very popular in the first game, and I suspect it won't be very popular in the second. People have a hard time understanding gamers who don't want experience points.

My second comment about this definition is that it tends to reward star power and grand-standing. More subtle things – like not demanding the GM's attention, letting the other players do things, and quietly building up the party in the background, go unrewarded, even though they are just as important to a smoothly running game. Or, for that matter, playing a character well when his (or her) reactions are typical rather than distinctive, which tends not to be noticeable.

Another problem I've seen with rewards for good roleplaying is that sometimes the GM is not very specific about what he or she likes. As an extreme example, a player who does something really cool and something disruptive will end up getting an average number of points, and so can miss early warnings to correct their behavior. Sometimes, in order to use experience points as feedback, the GM must give specifics about the rewards. This is particularly nice because most feedback is a positive reward for good work. Knowing specifics usually gives even more encouragement.

I have also seen GMs using experience points this way assume that problem players have been 'given a message,' when they are docked points. Naturally, this leads to confusion and more bad feelings. A player can hardly change their behavior when they don't know what behavior needs changing. Meanwhile, other players may be given the impression that the problem has been dealt with.

I'm not saying that 'good roleplaying' eps can't be used as feedback. But the GM *should not* exaggerate their affect, or expect too much from the method. It's fairly subtle, and isn't likely to resolve real problems unless it leads to talking about the problem more openly.

Finally, there is the question of the players' opinions, whether they are incorporated into the process of awarding points, and how. I've always believed players should have some control of things. After all, it's their game too. They ought to be able to give the GM (and the other players) feedback on their performances too.

Of course, there are other kinds of feedback. But experience points have another advantage. Look at how they work for players. They are one of the major motivating factors in the game, the players' reward for playing. It's this that makes them such a good vehicle for feedback.

The GM, on the other hand, gets no such rewards. There is, of course, the entertainment of a good game, which the players also enjoy. And, to some extent, the extra responsibility is balance by somewhat more control over the game, a wider diversity of roles to play, and more status. But GMs rarely get that extra pat on the back, the acknowledgement that they are appreciated by the players. As a consequence, some GMs have a tendency to burn out.

So, why not award the GM experience points. It works for the players. And, in addition, the players can use them for feedback, in the same way that the GM uses the experience points awarded to the players to give them feedback.

How to award experience points to a GM is another question. To be honest, I only really thought about this when I was trying to come up with ideas for this topic. So, I haven't had time to come up with a scheme, test it out, and report on the results. But there are a few things to consider when awarding points to the GM.

This is because a GM's job is different than a players'. The player has one character to worry about at a time, and any experience points awarded are tied to that character. The GM has multiple NPCs, some of which they may treat almost as personal PCs, others of which may be little more than templates used to generate cannon fodder. (It's even possible for a GMs not to have NPCs with growth potential, in which case the group might want to find something else to use instead). Also, the GM would receive points from all the players. If that was used for a single NPC, that NPCs powers could increase dramatically compared to any one PC, which might disrupt play balance.

So, how would I deal with the various problems I've outlined? What do I think is the best way to award experience points for good roleplaying?

First, they should be awarded to each and every player according to their merits, rather than competively. This doesn't solve the problem of stage time, but does mitigate it. Additionally each player can be treated as an individual – new or shy players can be encouraged if they do a better job than usual, even if it is fairly average compared to the rest of the group.

Different systems award different amounts, depending the play balance of the system, but if possible the awards should fall into three ranks: an average rank, for players who put in a good solid performance; a higher rank for excellent roleplaying; and a lower rank for problems (in some cases, this might be zero). This encourages the players, and allows enough variation to give some feedback.

Where possible, especially high or low awards should include some explanation. Because feedback can sometimes be negative, and people don't like to be dressed down in public, these awards should generally be given in private. This is somewhat up to the GM, however. Occasional public kudos for good work, or amusing commentary (like subtracting and adding points for the same action) can be fun and encouraging.

Points should be awarded to the GM by each player in the same way. Points can be spent immediately, in blocks according to what each player gives the GM, or saved in a large pool. Points spent immediately can used for NPCs in play, but no NPC can get experience from more than one block. On the other hand, points that are saved can be used to create new NPC (like that really nasty villain). There is no restriction on how many the GM uses, except the size of the pool itself.

Of course, that is just my opinion, and as I've said, I haven't really had a chance to put it into practice. But I hope you've enjoyed the ramble, along with its various observations and maybe got a new idea or two along the way. And if anyone does try out some of the ideas, I'd love to hear how they turn out.

Setting Is Theme: Another Look At Mechanics

A long time ago, in issue #2 of the Dancing Priestess, I took a look at the relationship between roleplaying and fiction. In particular, I looked at how comments made about creating and writing characters could be applied to roleplaying. At the time, I had in mind a follow up article, focusing on different aspects of fiction. Almost two years later, I am finally getting to it.

In the previous article, I looked at the idea that character and plot are intimately connected, to thee point of being almost inseparable. The setting of a piece is connected to its theme, in a similar fashion, though not as closely. This idea is not nearly as universally accepted or quoted - I've only seen it in one place so far. But it intrigues me, especially as it applies to science fiction, fantasy, and roleplaying.

But how is setting related to theme? Take, for example, the setting of modern France. Of course this includes the physical geography of mountains, rivers, cities, and familiar landmarks. But it also includes a particular cultural perspective. How people react, what they consider good manners, how they show off, or hide, different aspects of their personalities, and even what personality traits are admired or disdained. These in turn help determine what actions are likely to be successful, and which are doomed to failure. In other words, the setting determines how the world works, at least within the framework of the story.

Theme, on the other hand, is related to the 'meaning' of a story. People read fiction because it simplifies real life. It takes something that is messy and chaotic, with many possible threads going in all directions, and streamlines it, giving it purpose and direction. All actions have a place in the narrative, with a cause (from previous actions) and an effect on actions in the future. There is always an answer to the question of why something happens, even though it is rarely explicitly stated. And this is what we learn from reading the book, the 'meaning' we take away with us. Why things happen. How the world works.

Sometimes theme isn't in the form of an actual process. Rather it shows up in the way the author describes the characters and the world they inhabit, the automatic assumptions he or she makes about what is important, and how the characters and their world relate to each other. Or it can come from the character's attitudes, how they view the world, and the events of the story. But the theme is still drawn from the setting - what parts of the world the author focuses on, and how the characters interact with the world.

This is even more obvious when it comes to fantasy and science fiction. For example, to describe the setting of The Lord of the Rings requires more than just a map of Middle Earth. It also includes elves and dwarves and hobbits, powerful wizards and magical creatures, rings that are desired by all and corrupt everything they touch. Indeed, in most of Middle Earth, evil functions by deception, appearing 'fair' to gain acceptance, and then corrupting, or perverting, everything it touches, just like the one ring. A major theme of the story is not just the nature of evil (represented by the ring and Sauron), but the nature of the courage, strength, and loyalty required to fight it (as shown by the various races). And this is implicit in the setting - in the things which exist in Middle Earth and the way they work.

Or consider the setting of Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land. One relatively normal planet (a future Earth). One alien planet (Mars). One ambassador (Michael Valentine Smith) to bring the two places together. One 'alien' concept - that of truly understanding, or groking, the nature and purpose of the things around us – and the various 'powers' those in tune with this concept can use. Most of the book, almost all of it in fact, is about this concept. How it works, what the implications are, and how various characters react to and are changed by it. According to your viewpoint, the theme is either how worldview affects peoples' actions, or the repercussions of a new and unusual worldview. In either case, it is dependent on the existence of groking.

Perhaps this is the best way to look at it. Theme is dependent on setting Only in a setting that exposes the mechanics of a process, can the effects of the process be judged. Science fiction, etc. deals with settings that differ from reality – not just a character which might exist but doesn't, but things which don't exist at all. These alien elements are symbolic of elements in the real world. Their difference draws attention to them, laying bare the bones of the process for us to understand, and allowing insights that would be concealed in a more cluttered and realistic setting. See the world in a new light, thru the eyes of SF.

If theme is dependent on setting, and in particular on how a setting works, then in a RPG theme is dependent on mechanics. The fact that most roleplaying games have either fantasy or science fiction elements, or both, only makes this clearer. This is one reason mechanics are so important when

describing games to prospective players – almost the first thing that comes up right before genre. The mechanics alone aren't the theme – if they were we'd just read the books and never play. But they define, and limit, what is possible, thereby limiting,, and giving definition to , the potential theme.

Onc result of this is that there is no universal, elegant, mechanic that works for all themes, all settings, or all games. There might be a mechanic that is like the 12 note, even temper, scale used in Western music, in which every note is slightly, but equally, out of tune with every other note. Such a mechanic is equally inelegant for all games, always just a little off, but usable. But some things would still be expressed better in other, more tailored mechanics.

Consider, for example, the differences between GURPS and World of Darkness, one of the few examples of a setting described by two different mechanics. GURPS is like the even tempered scale, the most popular, and possibly best, universal mechanic. Vampire, on the other hand is tailored to a very specific genre and setting. I happened to see the GURPS version first, and was intrigued, cspecially by the mechanics they introduced for handling temptation. But I could also see the mechanics were clumsy. Then I looked at White Wolf's version. What had been clumsy in GURPS was elegant and clean, fitting into the mechanic it was intended for, enhancing rather than distracting from, the games purpose. Whatever else you say about White Wolf, their mechanics for temptation and its consequences can't be beat.

Later, when the two parties fell out, one claiming the other didn't understand, and preserve, the true vision of the setting, I was not surprised. Much of the theme of Vampire centers around temptation, and how the characters handle it. While the premise of both mechanics remained the same - essentially, use will/willpower to avoid temptation – the results were markedly different, leading to games with very different themes. The clash was, perhaps, inevitable.

To be honest, most RPGs don't talk about theme. Those that do are considered pretentious. Many writers have the same attitude. Partly this is the result of endless, pointless, high school English assignments, demanding what the 'meaning' of a story is.

But in roleplaying games there is another reason. In a story, the writer can influence the theme by controlling how the story ends, and how the characters react to the results. But no one person controls what happens in an RPG. This makes for a great game, but it also means that you can't really advertise the theme of a game, because, in fact, you don't know what it is.

Which is a pity. If there is a point to this article, it should be this: Here is a new way of describing a game, so that everyone knows and can agree on the game they are playing. No one is interested in talking. But tell me this. If theme is so pointless, why does everyone place so much importance on the mechanics used for a game? Aren't they all interchangeable?

The Granddaddy Of Them All

It is, or it should be, the age of licensing. If tabletop roleplaying is ever to become a part of popular culture, and a marketing success, it will be on the coat-tails of something else. Now that special effects can finally produce believable SF and fantasy movies, there are more coat-tails than ever to ride on. I'm not sure I want that to happen, but I am sure there are plenty of businessmen who do want it, and they have a lot more control of the situation.

Of course, some licensing is good, some bad. Sometimes it depends on the product being licensed. What works in the controlled medium of fiction fails in the interactive medium of RPGs. Sometimes it depends on the adaptation. When I first started this essay, I meant to explain why Middle Earth was a bad setting for RPGs. But as I thought about it, I realized there are not one, but three, adaptations, that I have experienced. They touch on the very beginnings of the hobby, and the ways in which they fail and succeed are illuminating.

The first adaptation is personal, though I doubt it is unique. Reading The Lord of the Rings for the first time as a teenager, I was not satisfied with the role of a passive observer. I created a character, with roughly my personality and some additional training in weapons and survival, and joined the other characters on their quest. At the ford, I saved Boromir's life, and rescued Pippin and Merry. Later I found out their capture led to the good guys finding powerful allies, and winning an important battle. So, as a result of my actions, the good guys lost.

Strictly speaking this was not a roleplaying game, which in my opinion requires at least two people, and some structure for assigning them roles. But it bears a lot of similarities, and I did learn a lot from it. For the most part life lessons, like all actions have consequences. But I also learned things about roleplaying.

For one thing, this is precisely the experience most gamers are looking for in a licensed product: the chance to actually take part in the story; to have something like that happen to them. Most gamers never get this close to the real thing, partly because they finish the book before they start gaming. But also because, as this example shows, it works badly. Plots are designed differently in writing, where the author has control, than in a RPG, where no plan survives contact with the players, or the GM. For this reason it ultimately fails. You can't be 'like Frodo' if your actions are doomed to failure.

The second adaptation is the officially licensed product put out by ICE (creators of rolemaster, now bankrupt). But it could really include any of the unofficial adaptations, games where the GM uses the setting of Middle Earth, and works out his own stats for the relevant characters. This is the kind of adaptation that most people expect when they talk about a licensed product. It must work for some people, since so many try it. But not for me.

One of the things that makes The Lord of the Rings work is the style Tolkien used. He wrote like an academic, in particular like a historian. This makes everything in the story realistic, and important.

If it wasn't important, it wouldn't be included in a historical chronicle. That feeling of epic importance is a major part of what people want from playing in Middle Earth. But the historical tone also implies that anything Tolkien didn't mention is not important. To assume otherwise breaks the suspension of disbelief. To make it worse, Tolkien include a wealth of historical details in the appendixes, etc.

So anyone who plays in Middle Earth faces one of several unsatisfactory options. One can play in historical times, knowing that whatever the characters do it will pale in comparison to what the characters in The Lord of the Rings (or the Silmarillian) experience.

One can change the setting, so that history is no longer set in stone. In this case the PCs can recapitulate the events of the trilogy, which feels something like a railroad. Or the GM can change the setting even more, to offer new plot twists – but in that case one begins to wonder if one is playing in Middle Earth. After all, what would The Lord of the Rings be without the destruction of the One Ring.

Finally one can play after the events of the trilogy; either shortly after, when there is little to do, or at the end of the fourth age. This is probably the best solution, except for those people who believe the fourth age would correspond to modern / historical times. Certainly, the world would change considerably from that of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, even without such a correspondence. So again, you wouldn't precisely be playing in the setting Tolkien imagined.

So again, this kind of adaptation fails to deliver on the promise implicit in a licensed product: to give the player an experience like that of reading the book (or seeing the movie). This is not to say that it is completely pointless. A good GM can still use the setting to run an entertaining game. And some people may find the familiarity of the setting enjoyable. But, ultimately, this kind of licensing fails to deliver. You can't be 'like Frodo' if Frodo's been there and done everything already.

The third adaptation is not supposed to have anything to do with The Lord of the Rings. There is probably quite a bit of money riding on this, because I'm fairly certain the company in question hasn't paid for it, at least not yet. And the Tolkien estate defends their copyright viciously (they are probably directly and intentionally responsible for ICE's bankruptcy, just so they would have a clean license to sell someone else).

The third adaptation, the one that got it right, is the first edition of D & D and AD & D. There is very little in either of these books about setting, and what there is largely concerns dungeons, which, though they appear in Tolkien (ex: Moria) are hardly a staple of Middle Earth. There's also a lot of material that has nothing to do with it, including tons of monsters, and an over emphasis on dragons.

On the other hand, look at the similarities. The PC races are taken straight from Middle Earth, not just in the inclusion of Halflings (another name for Hobbit even in the trilogy) but in the exclusion of, say, talking animals, a la Narnia, or cards, a la Alice in Wonderland. With the exception of priests, the classes come from Middle Earth. This is most notable for rangers, but can also be seen in the presumption that thieves (or burglars) belong in a party of adventurers – an attitude straight out of The Hobbit. Which, of course, leads to the alignment system. Even at 12 years old, I could tell

that chaotic good (and therefore the entire law/chaos axis) had been invented for these adventuresome thieves who helped the good guys. And I would add, apropos my last article, that one could hardly play in Middle Earth with out an alignment system.

The result is that you can build a character, almost like the ones in the books, but with enough distinction to make it truly yours. And when that character goes off to adventure, you are not limited by what happens in the books. Each adventure is truly yours. And yet each draws on, and bears similarities to, the source. This is what the buyer of a licensed product is looking for. This is why I got into roleplaying games. I even suspect that this is why D & D did so well when it first came out, compared to other early games. Paradoxically it is also why The Lord of they Rings is treated with so much respect by gamers. It is no better or worse than, say, The Brother's Grimm and yet we treat it as fundamental to our hobby.

I should add that there was a lot more to early D & D than just Tolkein. (And certainly it has grown since then. Game companies like universal, or near universal mechanics, because making a profit is easier, so as D & D has evolved it has grown farther and farther from Middle Earth as a source.) For some people the relationship to Middle Earth provided, at best, a touchstone of familiarity, and, at worst, a corny and uninspired framework for characters. For every GM who followed Tolkien (not the easiest thing to do) there were 10 or 20 who did not. And yet, of all the attempts to turn Middle Earth into a roleplaying game, D & D came closest to delivering on the promise. Even if they weren't trying to.

There is something to be learned from this. Not that all licensed products are doomed. There are many stories out there, and not all of them have the same flaws as Middle Earth. For example, the Star Wars universe has considerable depth without the feeling that Luke, Han and Leia's story is the only one worth telling. Rather it is another way to license a product, one that may work better than the traditional one for some properties.

If, as my previous article suggests, each setting has a separate mechanic that fits it best, than it is possible to create a mechanic that acts as a framework for a setting. Such a mechanic would provide the rules for how teleporting dragons, a la Pern, or telepathic horses, a la Valdemar, work. By defining what does, and does not, exist, what can, and can not, happen, it creates an outline of the setting it is intended to emulate. An outline that can be used with any map, and any set of characters; which retains the spirit of the original, but is not limited by it. And I, for one, would like to see that happen.

Comments Interregnum #39

Cindy Shettle (Words on the Wing #10): I admit I haven't looked too closely at Furry Pirates, but what I did see makes me think it's strength lies in being a good historical pirate game, rather than a Furry game. For one thing, it seems they use magic more as an excuse for secret societies and intrigue than a source of nifty powers. If I were interested in running a game set on the high seas, I'd definitely take a look at it. Even if I didn't use the system it has valuable ideas.

As far as ideas for Methos stories go, I agree that there is no point in writing a story if his immortality doesn't make some difference. However, that could come from his understanding of the past, or a relationship to several generations of a mortal family, among other things. I also like the idea of failing to have an alibi because he is involved in 'immortal business.' In fact, "Watching the Watchers" is a perfect set up for that.

As for "Watching the Watchers," I really liked the story. I especially liked the way Methos keeps evaluating and reevaluating his options, very much in character. I also liked the way you used his extra abilities. The were well explained, interesting, and realistic, but didn't overwhelm the story. I enjoyed the last scene too. It adds some depth to the story. But it's more like the end of a chapter than a true conclusion to the story, and Darius is somewhat out of character.

Elizabeth McCoy (The Real McCoy): There is to a plot. The problem / conflict to be resolved is how the protagonists acquire enough skill and knowledge to survive adolescence and be accepted as adults (using human equivalents of Unar life stages). Unlike for humans, the question is, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

This is a really good story. Besides the plotline, there is the description of a really unique culture, appropriate social interaction, and a protagonists who transforms from non-sentience to self-awareness to understanding of others. The one problem is that it is incomplete. It feels like I have fragments of the complete tale, and things have been left out.

George Phillies (Refugee): Congratulations on publishing This Shining Sea. I will have to pick it up, to add to my endless reading pile. I fully enjoyed this installment of Minutegrrrls. I especially liked Charles entertaining the troop of minutegrrrls that stayed behind to watch his craft, the pow-wow at Morbius's house, and Sandra Miller's introduction into the society of the top ranks during the walk. At some point you will have to give us more information on the organization and logistics of the private army (and just what is the popular army?) but I trust this will be dealt with in future installments. Too much information here would be didactic.

My only problem was the effects of long term sustain economic growth of 6% on housing. I have no problem with the existence of such growth, or the reason for it. But I think its effect on limited

resources, e.g. good land / space, would be quite different, especially as it would also mean expanding population. I also find it hard to deal with so many protagonists who are so good with tactics, though it would be unrealistic for the group to be otherwise.

Joseph Teller (The Swashbuckling Mage #10): I know I haven't really looked at Feng Shui, but it seems to me that the degree of munchkinism would depend on the GM. Even if munchkins find the game attractive, that would not prevent a good GM from using the system for other things. I've also noticed, from my research into Kindred of the East, that games set in the orient have a reputation as 'hack and slash munchkinfests'. I think some of it is the alien culture. It makes it harder to recognize the opportunities for role-playing, and more difficult for game designers to come up with appropriate mechanics. It's much easier to come up with mechanics for combat, and anyway, martial arts are cool. But that doesn't mean the GM is limited if they have sufficient knowledge of the culture to make up for it. At least I hope not, since that is what I'm trying to do.

Dale Meier (The Chrome Libram #3): It's strange to start out by saying Goodbye. I'm sad to see you go. As you know, I've forwarded this to you privately, since you no longer receive IR. I'm also printing it in the comments section of my zine. Some of the things I wanted to say are important, and I wanted to share them publicly, as I wanted to thank you publicly for your contributions. I have always enjoyed your zines. They were well written and full of good ideas.

The minor comment I have to make concerns one of those good ideas. In your article on house rules you mentioned one you use regarding source material, namely that the GMs library should be the definitive word on how the rules work and what's allowed. I'm considering starting a campaign – my first time ever as a solo GM – and this is one rule I intend to put in place and follow.

The major comments I want to make concern, of course, the Dragon and the Cross.

I am not certain, but it seems I had the wrong idea about what you were doing. I assumed you were writing an article for gamers unfamiliar with the deeper aspects of Christianity on what these aspects are and how to incorporate them into a game. Instead, it seems you were writing an article for Christian gamers on how to bring their religion and their hobby together.

At some point I requested an article on 'Christianity in Gaming' or at least expressed a personal interest in it. I was thinking more along the lines on the first idea, since I am, myself, not Christian., and jumped to conclusions. As such, my comments are slanted, and may not be as helpful as intended. I apologize for the mistake.

It seems the experience was an unfortunate one. I was aware that some Christians are hostile to gaming, and, apparently, even those involved in the hobby can be hostile to some aspects of it. It was not my intention to put you in the cross-hairs of a flame war, if, in fact, that is what I did.

It was certainly not my intention for your faith to be so thoroughly questioned in the pages of IR.

Let me be honest. I wanted that article. I wanted it because I believe Christianity, real Christianity, is a rare thing among gamers. And I believe that such minority views deserve to be heard. They add something valuable to the community we all share.

I also wanted that article from you. You are a thoughtful and articulate person. You don't castigate people just because they don't share your beliefs, or run games for the sole purpose of conversion. You can speak about difficult issues and still make sense. When you talk about Christian gaming, you include faith and allegory, not just rituals and moral codes.

I was selfish. It did not occur to me that I had asked you to stand up and be a hero.

Your article has caused ripples. There is no denying it. Among other things IR has been accused of an "anti-Christian bias." For some this is even a reason to be less involved. It is not what I wanted. It may not be under my control. But it is something I have to consider.

I strongly believe in a persons right to speak out and be heard, no matter how strange or different their opinion. I wanted IR to be a place where Christians could talk about Christian gaming without feeling threatened. I also wanted it to be a place where Pagans could talk about Pagan gaming without feeling threatened.

Both of these are strange and different viewpoints. Few people realize how strange. Few people ever find out, ever bother to listen to these viewpoints when they are presented in depth to learn how diverse the human race truly is.

Few people even have the chance. Met with this indifference, or outright hostility, most people of strange and different viewpoints prefer to remain silent. Who can blame them. They risk much, and gain little. I know. I am one of them. Those who aren't silent are heroes.

In my opinion, they are the most important heroes.

So, when you spoke up I cheered. I did not expect such contentious replies. When I saw them I was glad that others, too, would speak up. And again, I cheered. Only when you replied did I realized this was not quite the response I wanted. My view that everyone should speak up and be heard was naive. The real world, apparently, is not so simple.

Back to the drawing board. As editor of IR, there is little I can do. I can lead by example, but have little control over what other contributors write. And, in this case, even leading by example is difficult. I am not, by any normal definition, Christian. When it comes down to it, my own opinions tend to favor those who detract, rather than support, your faith.

But I can, at least, do this. I can tell you, and everyone else, how much I appreciated what you wrote, and the risks you took in presenting it – both to other Christians and here. I admit it was not quite the article I wanted. At first this frustrated me, and I am sorry so much of that frustration showed in my comments.

But in the end, I learned a lot. About myself, about the world, and – what was my original goal in looking for such and article – about Christianity. For that, and for your courage, I am grateful.

Thank you.

* * *

I ought to stop here, but there are a couple of other comments I wanted to make, in conjunction with the Dragon and the Cross and your article on house rules. Some of my earlier comments talked about the mechanics that might be used for games with a Christian theme. It seems to me that corruption points are a good example.

I am guessing a bit on this – I don't know as much about your religion as I ought to – but it seems that there are two parts to spiritual health. On the one hand, good deeds, and on the other faith. Either one, without the other, can have bad consequences.

An alignment system with good and evil at opposite poles provides a framework against which you can judge good and bad deeds. Corruption points provide movement between the two, a way to graph an individual character's spiritual journey. Since the actual definition of what is good and bad is left to the GM, the mechanics themselves don't impose a particular morality (well mostly. Some moralities don't oppose good and evil in quite this way – however, these wouldn't be Christian.)

Of course this leaves the question of faith. It might be a little arrogant of me to suggest a solution… But it does occur to me that if characters can have an alignment that measures how 'good' or 'evil' they are, then they might have a statistic that measures the strength of their faith. Something like corruption points could be used to raise or lower it, depending to what they do or experience. Again, the actual events that cause such a change would be left in the GMs hands, so the mechanic wouldn't impose a particular opinion…

All this may be very off the mark. I don't even know if you are still working on the article. But, I thought I would mention it, in case you were and found the ideas useful.

* * *

There's one last thing I would like to clarify at least for the readers of IR. I'm not against Christianity, but there is as interaction between Christians, American Popular Culture, and Public Policy that I do oppose. One might explain it this way – I oppose the affect Christianity, as it is perceived by popular culture, has on public policy.

For example, the bible does not strictly say it is OK to kill homosexuals (unlike witches). There are some people who interpret it this way, and also many many people who don't. But American culture has a stereotype for Christians: Even if they don't want to 'kill' homosexuals, they do want to remove them from the culture; to deny their rights, like protection from violence; even to deny their very existence.

In the search for votes, Christianity and respect for God are good, electable, traits. Candidates express this by conforming to and supporting the American stereotype of Christianity. Some politicians make it an important part of their campaign to say, "Hey look, I'm Christian," meaning, by Christian, the stereotype, not the reality.

The difficulty, as you can see, is that the belief in this stereotype is so strong that it becomes the standard by which the word is defined. This is made more complex by the fact that the most active and prominent Christian leaders (e.g. Pat Robenson) are, in fact, pushing for this agenda. So it is difficult to argue that it is only a stereotype which describes some, but not all, Christians.

I am, in some things, a pragmatist. If that is how the term is defined in American culture, than that is what the term means. At the very least, if I am talking to someone who defines the term that way I will use their definition. I prefer substantial debates to arguments over semantics. Because I believe the majority of Americans define 'Christian' this way, I sometimes use this definition in public discourse (and IR) even though I know it doesn't completely reflect the truth.

The problem is that I have used both definitions in the pages of IR, and I have not always been careful to distinguish between them. As a result, I sometimes say things that are very 'anti-Christian' when what I am against is the Christian agenda, and not the religion itself.

Comments Interregnum #40

Jim Vassilakos (Flutterblast #1): Welcome to IR I can't say I play a lot of AD & D, but that is largely a result of the business practices of the company rather than any inherent faults in the game. (The current one, the so called open source mechanics, sounds like a good idea, but the fine print allows Hasbro to claim intellectual property rights over other peoples' work in the d20 system whenever they want to (read if it sells well). This is a con job far too many small companies have fallen for, and I'm afraid they're going to get screwed and end up bankrupt.)

Anyway, I'm still interested in hearing about the game, and the various things that can be done with it. Your use of the d30 sounded interesting, and I liked the luck die very much. One of the best uses of random number generators is to avoid arguments by objectively determining events, though there is still some subjective judgment in it. I wouldn't make a tavern hostile just because the player rolled a 2 when looking for elves (unless the player was using the presence of elves to judge the crowds temper). As for mages... Since I've only ever been able to play low level mages, I've always felt they were under rather than over powered.

I've used background generators before, and tend to agree that they add something to the game. However, I don't think I would ever use Central Casting, which has gotten some bad reviews in IR. Apparently they divide traits into "light side' and 'dark side' traits, and then categorize the results in ways that are narrow minded and offensive to some people. What is a larger problem for me is that

they are attempting to reduce a wide number of possibilities into an over simple polarity. I prefer a more diverse view on life.

What works better, in my experience, is to give the players benefits for taking 'plot traits', backgrounds that link them into the campaign and can be used as hooks by the GM. We did this with the current Earth Unmasked campaign, with amazing results. The GM has almost too many possible storylines, and the players are not only involved in their character's lives, but they have begun designing plot twists for the other characters.

Peter Maranci (Zine Without A Name #1): Welcome back. It sounds like you've been very busy. Hope everything works out as planned, and that you don't lose touch with people in the area. Also, thanks for your help with IR.

I liked the article on con survival, but agree that it isn't quite finished yet. In particular, I think you could say a lot more about the availability of food. For some reason, con suites never quite do it for me, and we always need to bring stacks of food.

The campaign with Timmy was also one of my favorites. Two of my favorite PCs were in it, and some of my favorite plot-lines, including the sword that Timmy got. We really haven't had a chance to play it since you left. If you had the time to come up here, I'd be more than happy to play it.

Joseph Teller (The Swashbuckling Mage #11): For the most part, I think your attempts to generate cinematic mechanics have worked. Occasionally, you ere on the side of caution, so that threats to the characters don't feel as lethal as they should – but this may just be a result of my playing style. Most of my characters are pretty cautious, and don't get involved in combats unless they can help in some way, something that can be difficult without offensive abilities.

George Phillies (Refugee): Wow. That certainly ups the excitement quotient. I liked the problems presented by the apparently dead, but tactically useful, fragment of a hostile ship falling into a gravity well, as it undoubtedly would in reality. I also like the results of having it turn out to be inhabited, both the opportunities and the problems it presents the antagonists. In the final section, I liked Sandra's ironic comparison of her actions to those of Commando Jill, but may have missed some of it as the action in the proceeding combat was hard to follow. The only reason I know she did the impossible is because she comments on it afterwards.

Michael Lavoie (True Magick #19): I also liked the Black Jewels Trilogy, especially the successful reversal of good and evil. This isn't just a cosmetic change – the good guys really do exhibit traits we often categorize as bad, yet are sympathetic and capable of doing the 'right' thing. This is also one of the stories weaknesses, as it results in some of the stronger imagery, and sometimes the characters aren't that sympathetic after all.

However, the part I found most interesting is one you didn't mention. Along with the two factions you covered there is a third, the members of Jaenelle's actual family, who rule the territory of Chaillot. On the one hand, they try to oppose the Matriachy, and the taint it is spreading. On the other hand, they don't see Jaenelle's potential, so they fail to protect her from some really bad abuse.

The presence of such 'neutral' characters adds a lot of interesting twists. Unfortunately, she pretty much drops these plot-lines throughout the second book.

She's also come out with a new book, The Invisible Ring, set in the same universe but unconnected to the other three. I haven't read it yet, so I can't comment on the content.... Giving how inventive the author is, I'm not sure whether I'm happy to see more of this universe, or disappointed that she didn't create a new one.

I appreciated your stories about the PCs failure. Now I feel better about some of Joe's adventures, where the PCs bumbled around like the keystone cops. Not that anyone would accuse Joe of presenting easy mysteries or simple plot-lines.

Elizabeth McCoy (The Real McCoy): I must admit, it took me a while to realize why you gave the warning about incest. To me the story is a variation on orphan child seeking acceptance. If there was anything sexual, I didn't pick up on it. The antics of the hatchling are very amusing though. Definitely a spirited little thing...

Cindy Shettle (Words on the Wing #11): It never occurred to me to look at the Rainbow people as a module in Magician's Universe. Rather, I think this is an attribute on systems without mechanics Once you define enough of how things work, you can decide that specific things work differently in a specific part of the whole. Then again, that's kind of what a module is.

REFUGEE

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Commentationes

Like many of you, I received Collie's note indicating that she was leaving the APA. I viewed hrer as one of our most valuable contribuors, and am most distressed that she departed. I confess that I have been in campaigns that permitted magic, telepathy, faster than light travel, divine beings who respond to prayer,...all items markedly absent in the real world...and find people who insist that everyone's campaign has to agree with their image of physical reality to be more than a trifle tedious.

I confess I also tired a bit of campaigns with really suvstantial stereotypes, such as the old Defenders campaign in which the GM was apparently convinced that all military officers were idiots. (Of course, his were. For starters, there were the geniuses who set up against an attack from the water by parking the divisional artillery just above the wave line. And getting hit with a magically induced tidal wave and amphibious monsters. Twice!

The second time this happened, my character suggested in character that the Defenders should send a thank you note to the hideous monster who appeared in these idiots' headquarters, and ate them.

No Tears for a Princess

They walked through the night. Neither wished to speak. Tegel-La was well past the zenith, its brilliance sufficient to read a scroll. The Nightstar, dimming and sparking every seven heart-beats, followed by two handspans in Tegel-La's wake. Soon they'd want to camp. Elaine suddenly froze in midstride, gesturing in the same motion for Grandoon to halt. She listened intently.

"A horse's neigh," she whispered. "Well behind us. If it's on the pavement, its hooves are muffled."

Grandoon reached to his purse, withdrew a coin, and sent it spinning into the distance. Elaine faded off the road, leaning against a tree to string her bow. Finally Grandoon spoke. "The Eye of Round is hard to deceive. We are followed, indeed on horses with muffled hooves, by six knights with colors masked, two men of the cloth, and a pair of winged sea-trolls. They carry a variety of modestly potent thaumaturgic and spiritual protections. Baron Morgno! As usual, up to no good, save when he might be caught."

"Oh, great! He's not going home; he lives south of Arburg. It's a bit late for an after-dinner stroll, it being close to midnight. I can guess what he wants." She tapped the scabbard of her new sword. "I'm gonna fight eight guys on horseback, and two trolls, too? The eight guys, yeah, sure, but those trolls are tough. And sea trolls are real good trackers. In daylight I could dodge'em, I think, but at night? No way. Not when I can't see, and they can. I suppose they've got extra horses?" Grandoon nodded. "Outrunning them's not real likely, either. Well, don't think I expect you to risk your neck against that crew. You can fly off, but I'm stuck here. I could give'm the sword. Naww, they'd kill me anyway. Besides, it's mine."

"Now, I only said that they had modestly potent protections against magic. When facing the Duke's overpaid amateurs, such trinkets would likely suffice. Against one of my professional skills, their protections are rather less effective. Would you fight the Baron one-on-one? His wards would require some preparation to disperse, short of violence that would level much of this forest, but his companions are less well shielded."

"Morgno?" Elaine grinned contemptuously. "I'll take that creep apart with bare hands. It's his army and trolls -- they're a bit much."

They hid behind a line of trees. Grandoon raised a fresh illusion: images of him and

Elaine standing in the road, close besides each other. A phantasmal Grandoon pointed with one hand at Tegel-La, but kept his other arm firmly wrapped around the phantasmal Elaine's waist. The images stared eye to eye, less interested in the sky than in each other. As the Baron's troop approached, the phantasmal Elaine pulled the phantasmal Grandoon closer and leaned into his shoulder.

The real Elaine fumed. Lean on Grandoon, indeed! Who did the phantasm think she was, anyway? Unlike Morgno, she could tell that the figures were unreal, but she still saw what Grandoon had them do next. She dearly wished she had the opportunity to kick Grandoon in the shins, hard, but all she could do was scowl in his direction. Grandoon's smile betrayed him. Despite the imminence of battle, he was teasing her.

Baron Morgno smirked. His prey were too preoccupied to notice his approach. A single slice with one hand alerted his retainers. One raised a fist, palm rearwards; a signet ring glowed pale orange as it swallowed the beat of the horses' gallop. They charged down the road, three abreast. The sea trolls loped behind, fangs bared and wings outstretched.

Grandoon shook his head, acknowledging the talent of the Baron's hired magicians. He could see the Baron charge, horse's hooves striking sparks against the stone. Even against the quiet of the woods, nothing could be heard. The Baron's voice, the rattle of armor, the battle cries of the men —all were gone, swallowed by the ring's ensorcelments.

At the last instant, the illusionary Elaine opened her eyes and glanced over Grandoon's shoulder. The Baron saw her push Grandoon from the berm, struggling at the same time to draw her sword. Her speed was enough to frighten Morgno, but she was too late. His lance reached for her throat.

The lance pricked her form. She disappeared in a flurry of sparks, which scattered in all directions. At the same moment the illusionary Grandoon was swallowed by a concentric set of glowing rings which quickly shrank to nothing.

The Baron reined in his horse. The disappearances were wizard's tricks, but ones only possible over small distances. Elaine must still be very close, well within the tracking range of his trolls. For all practical purposes, he had won. His men were protected against any direct assault by the mage. One girl on foot could hardly prevail against a dozen opponents. Very soon the sword would be his.

Grandoon rose from the brush to intone the final syllables of his cantrip. A cone of violet iridescence sprang from one finger and enveloped Baron Morgno's men. The glare illumined tree branches, throwing shadows up into the sky. It became blindingly bright, then slowly faded. Elaine forced herself to peer through the brilliance. Baron Morgno and two lieutenants remained on horseback. Around them, men, mounts, and trolls had been reduced to a fine ash, which gradually crumbled and fell to the pavement.

Grandoon cursed to himself. He had promised only the Baron would survive. Two of the Baron's retinue remained. Elaine didn't wait for an explanation. She knew he'd have one. No matter what happened, you could count on a mage to provide a completely rigorous rationalization of his spell's effects -- after the fact. She had little faith in mages' promises, no matter how carefully worded. At least she only had to fight three men, instead of eight. She drew her bow.

Her first arrow glanced from a lieutenant's shield. The second and third transfixed him and his companion. A further pair of arrows rattled off the Baron's chest. The Baron laughed, loudly, while his men slumped to the ground.

"Give up, little girl," he shouted. "I wear enchanted armor, proof against all missile weapons. Though you had the strength of Hercules, you could not pierce it with a bow. Now, yield! Give me your sword as weregeld for my men, and I'll let you go on your way. Refuse, and I'll kill you, and take the sword anyway."

Grandoon stood back to watch. He wanted to see Elaine's prowess in combat; now he had his chance. She had dismissed the Baron as a nothing, scarcely a challenge to fight. She could

prove her words without his further assistance.

Elaine dropped back under a tree. The sword the Baron so coveted was suddenly in her right hand. The Baron waved his lance at her, forgetting altogether that Grandoon would witness the crimes he intended to commit. "Afraid?" he taunted. "Afraid to come out in the open? Or are you afraid of horses?" She glared back. "Well, then, we'll fight on foot. The light chain you wear is scarcely a match for good plate. And don't think your sword is going to help. I wear a magic amulet, protecting me from the enchantments of ensorcelled blades. Against me, your sword is no more than good steel." He dismounted, the joints in his plate armor squeaking.

Elaine yawned affectedly. "Morgno," she said playfully, "You need one more amulet. What you need," she jabbed ahead, sword point touching him lightly in the stomach, "is protection from beer schooners."

"Impudent brat! What you need, more than all else, is instruction -- in showing proper respect for your betters."

They circled each other cautiously. The Baron stood a head taller than she. He charged, trying to use his weight and height to break down her guard. She stood her ground. They had not fought before. She was confident that he did not know her strength. As she blocked each of the Baron's blows, she felt her blade shift eerily in her grip. The sword was enchanted, then, even if it was ineffective against the Baron's amulet.

As they fought, part of her mind assessed the balance between them. The Baron was as slow and weak as she'd expected; his only real advantage was his armor. She tried a feint, luring the Baron toward her. He swung as she desired. She parried. Then she felt her blade shift against her grip, letting him through her defense. There passed an instant of recognition -- the enchantment in her sword was a curse, waiting for the optimal moment to reveal itself -- before he connected.

Her mail held, but his blow caught her in the ribs, still bruised from the previous day's encounter. Stunned by the shock, she dropped entirely into the defense, trying to hold him away. She could barely see. He sensed his advantage, and pressed in with a flurry of swings. For long moments, just holding him off left her stretched to the limit. She blocked; her sword tried to help him.

Then, suddenly, the struggle was over. The Baron lay unconscious, new dents in helm and breastplate marking her final strikes. In the end, she'd gone after him almost recklessly, beating through his guard time and time again. She couldn't remember that he'd connected against her, not after the first blow to the ribs. Now that he was on the ground, she was staggering. He had been a puny opponent, she considered. Her sword had more than compensated for his lacks.

Grandoon came to her side. "Ought I not bind your wounds?" he asked. His fingers searched out a bruise on her shoulder.

"Oh, come on." She forced herself to speak, then leaned almost drunkenly out of his grip. "I'm not gonna die, just because I got a couple cuts. I, I'm not even really bleeding, much. But take care of him." She gestured at the fallen Baron. "So he's a crook. He's the Duke's crony. If something happened to him, there'd be too many questions, and who ever believes my side of a story? No matter half the daughters in his domain would cheer at news of his passing. If he's alive, he'll keep quiet, and cover up for all of us -- after all, those piles of ash used to be important persons."

She wished Grandoon would shut up and go away. She squeezed her eyes closed, remembering other times when she had been safely by herself, not forced to make a show of courage.

"The sword?" Grandoon asked as he stood over the Baron, making passes with his staff.

"Cursed." Her voice sagged. "Strong, too. That's how he kept getting through. I kept missing him, and not hitting, and not hurting him when I hit." His back was to her. She slipped off her helmet and pressed fingers against her cheeks, trying to force back the tears. The sweat stung at the corners of her eyes. "I wish, I mean, I'd really wanted something a little better than this." She peered away into the woods, which faded into a dis-

tant tangle of grays and blacks.

"I observe that you stand, while he reposes on his backside." Grandoon spoke without facing her. Mortals, he recalled, tended to forget that a mage's inner eye saw equally well in all directions. From her pose, she wanted the illusion of privacy; he could see no reason not to grant it to her. "I suppose he's accustomed to having his bully boys go into battle for him. And the others were just that -- personal retainers and thugs, men of importance, but not men who'll be missed by independent allies. There's a glade a little farther ahead. I'd thought to camp there. Will you stay with me again?"

"Stop already?" Grandoon nodded, then waited while she gathered her things. "Grandoon," she asked, "How'd you like a cursed sword? I'd leave it for him -- serve him right -- but he'd be too suspicious. You must know some use for it." He accepted the weapon and its scabbard.

* * * * *

The glade rolled gently down to a deep brook. Little streamers of fog rose from the water into the autumn air. Despite Tegel-La's glare, the sky glittered with brilliant stars, hovering in clots and tangles close above the earth. Elaine, shoulders slumped, listened to the mage.

"You will stay with me tonight, won't you?" he urged.

"Out here in the woods? Naaw, I'd get soft -- like you. Besides, I'm gonna bathe first -- or should I be afraid of the water?" Her last question was baited. They were far enough from habitation for the water to be safe. To her taste Grandoon took an unreasonable number of precautions against lurking monsters.

"Hardly. Not so close to Arburg. Isn't it a little chill? Surely one in your condition ought have better shelter than a few blankets?"

"Oh, just quit pestering me! I'm not some court lady, to need pampering every moment like an Imperial Lap-cat."

"As you wish." He ignored her while she disappeared down-hill. With one boot he scraped an area free of leaves, then produced from his pack a toy house the size of an orange. The house he set in the middle of the cleared patch. He tapped its chimney with his finger, pointed in a circle at the ground, and withdrew his hand. His cabin sprang up before him, reaching in a few moments its full size. Without even a glance over his shoulder, he stepped inside and pulled shut the door.

The fireplace held a burning log, blazing as though Grandoon had spent the evening sitting before it. A pot of tea, freshly brewed, and warmed bread waited on a tray by the fireside. A distant hiss was the water-tube boiler, drawing water from the outside via displacement gate and heating it for Grandoon's bath.

Grandoon shed his cloak and turned to the large mirror over his workbench. At a touch it frosted, then cleared to reveal Elaine walking toward the brook. Grandoon snapped his fingers, pointing as he did at a bronze mask on the facing wall. The mask's jaw lowered; its mouth pursed. Its graven eyes looked from side to side, finally alighting on the mirror.

"Observe!" commanded Grandoon. "She goes to the stream, bathes, eats, and sleeps. When she sleeps, or if aught else occurs, call." The mask followed Grandoon's words, its eyes shifting slightly to the rhythm of his voice.

In the mirror, Elaine could be seen tiptoeing through the woods, slipping from shadow to shadow as though the Baron might be lurking behind the next tree. Once she stopped, peering intently behind her. She saw nothing, heard nothing. Had he been looking, Grandoon would have seen her stare directly through his mirror. What was it? she wondered. Was someone watching her?

Minutes later, she stood shoulder deep in water, washing a cut in her neck. Her armour lay on the bank. She held her cloak in the water, bringing together edges frayed and sliced in combat. She touched two matching pieces of cloth together; the

tear disappeared in a seamless mend. She smiled. The cape was a favorite possession. It was also the only magic item which had ever worked for her. Her eyes went blank as she recalled a young man, tall and thin, pressing it on her as a gift. She had been ever so reluctant to take it, but had treasured it ever since.

The cloak was whole again. The chill of the water brought her back to reality. She peered into the glade, still convinced that she was being watched. After the evening's events, she was slightly afraid of Grandoon. He had wandered casually through her mind, tugging at her memories, reminding her of events which she had wished long forgotten. Worse, he had done her a favor, killing half the Baron's party. He would not be the first mage to expect his favors to be acknowledged in an unacceptably physical way.

Her sleeping cloak rested on a bank of pine needles. Her travelling clothes hung from the branch, drying slowly; she wore only a short, sleeveless tunic. Waves of fatigue rolled over her. For minutes she stared at the cloak, too tired even to lie down. She could see the events of the past few days as a unified whole, with those she had aided turning seriatim against her.

Disappointment brought greater pain than did the bruises from ambush and duel. She thought distantly of Grandoon, who was forever trying to drag her off to bed. For all his desires, he had more-or-less always been a gentleman. After all, she was hardly the beauty that some of his more notorious loves had been.

Stiff with cold, she knelt, wrapped herself in the cloak, and nestled her head against her pack. Alone at last, no longer needing to pretend that she felt neither pain nor sorrow, she cried bitter tears until she floated off to sleep.

Chapter 3 (Mages)

Dorrance Bay was a sheet of slate blue edged with red-granite promontories and dense pine woods. The Academy stood on a small peninsula, almost surrounded by water, so that one could stand anywhere on its grounds and hear the distant rush of waves breaking against the rocks. The central buildings were a cluster of ivory tulips soaring gracefully over the tree tops. Other structures merged into the landscape, looking almost like outcroppings of the native stone.

Five mages sat in a solarium atop the central tower. Beyond its crystal dome could be seen the clear sky and the sparkling waters of the bay. One was a tall young woman, her well-filled figure little hidden by a simple tunic. She pressed her fingers against each other, as though playing with an unseen cat's cradle. A second was a dowager, short and dumpy, in a long woolen dress. The third was a young man, sharp nosed and thin of face, who perpetually glanced about, looking for that which wasn't there. An elderly man in blue fur-trimmed robes held a massy bronze amulet in one hand; he nodded sleepily, occasionally talking to himself. The fifth mage was randoon, resplendent in red silk and gold lace, puffing occasionally on his pipe while he let the others talk.

"So you received her as a dangerous sending from Lord Pyrrin?" The young lady stared at Grandoon, her chin delicately balanced on her fingertips. A shake of her head sent golden strands of hair shimmering across her face. She pushed back her locks, exposing bejewelled earings.

"Vanessa, I only took the most elementary of precautions." Grandoon punctuated his words with waves of his pipe. "If I'd thought she were really dangerous, I'd not have been so cavalier about having her sleep in my cottage. Even," he added hastily, "across the room from my bed. As I said, through my mirror her aura had no structure, no grain at all. That bespeaks magecraft, or untamed power, of a high order indeed."

"That was a neat trick. She just stepped in front of the mirror for you, when she knew what it did? And getting her to damp her aura..." The young man's stream of words was cut short by Grandoon's nod.

"Her outermost aura, Zoltan. She had inner screens. I glimpsed barriers within barriers, walls beyond walls, constantly shifting against each other. I saw what she let me see, and didn't risk forcing her for more."

"You got the memories you asked for. You sweet-talked her into exposing all sorts of things."

"Only if you call those obscure images 'exposing'," answered Grandoon. "I can't prove her answers were honest. She seemed to know those places, but -- sharp as the images were -- I couldn't name half of them."

"No." The old man realized he had interrupted, waited for the others' attentions, and finally continued. "No, Vanessa, the most dangerous sending yet found by the Apostate is not a little girl with a sword, but a Vissorant."

"Vissorant? ArchPatriarch, the images name no such creature." The young man realized that Vanessa's question to Grandoon was being answered, that the old man had heard nought that had been said since.

The ArchPatriarch, Gow's voice upon this earth, continued. "A Vissorant, as noted in the ***Celestial Bestiary*** of Omar of Timbuk, is a celestial being formed in the image of the stars of heaven, or of the Sun -- Omar is a bit unclear about which, or thought they were alike, which is truly a remarkable error for such a clear-sighted man --with all the star's energies, and the will needed to drive them. Omar likened the beast to a great confederation of cities, peopled entirely by mages, with a single all-wise ruler to lead each citizen in perfect harmony. The actual source of Omar's information..."

Vanessa raised one hand. "Wait! Pyrrin can summon this creature for use in warfare?" She hoped he'd notice her question. ArchPatriarch Gowophilus held in his hand the Amulet of Alpertus Magnus, a marvelous source of obscure important facts. The ArchPatriarch's mind wandered a trifle on account of his age. The Amulet, one of the Four Perfect Manifestations of Gow, distracted its wearers to the point of utter unworldliness. She remembered standing in the path of a gale-driven flash fire, trying to raise a Circle of Guard while the Amulet's bearer lectured her -- on the importance of flash fires to the breeding habits of condors. It had been most informative, but the distraction had nearly killed them both.

"Hardly. He boasts he knows the gate to its abode, a path through which it peers but cannot approach. The Amulet says he dares not open that path. The creature, by the way, thinks of itself as a whale, feeding on some celestial equivalent of plankton or krill."

"A whale, I suppose, is dread by the brine shrimp upon which it feasts." Zoltan snorted and resumed his conversation. "Grandoon, a gaggle of library liches is studying those memories you got from her. The crystals you engraved are real sharp. They figured out a bunch of them. We'll have them all sorted out tomorrow. But there're problems."

"Zoltan, you shouldn't work all the time. It's not good for you." The dowager smiled as she wagged a finger at him. "Those memory crystals were lovely, and you know it. So what if we can't figure out, say, which tree this girl slept under, every night in her life?"

"It's what we figured out that's the problem, Dame Alice. She's a fifteen year old girl, right? So what's she doing with memories of Arburg City Market being built? It went up in the last century. That can't be a real memory! But it makes sense if she were a fake from Pyrrin, a trick to mislead us or kill Grandoon. That explains her mental barriers, too. Automatons have no memories, so if you penetrated her aura, you'd see nothing, and think you weren't inside. The mirror would reflect its own back face, which is indeed featureless."

"I think, Zoltan, those are avertable errors," answered Grandoon. "Also, I live. Elaine's efforts were instrumental in liberating Arburg-am-Tressin from Pyrrin's minions. If Pyrrin sent her, he injured himself. To what gain? From what were we distracted? If Elaine had not been so mysterious, I would undoubtedly have been elsewise engaged, but not in striking

against the Apostate." He stared at Vanessa's figure. She returned his look. They both smiled.

"Well, suppose she is an artifice," suggested Vanessa. "What did she do? She wouldn't go near Grandoon, let alone try to stab him in his sleep. The cryptic mirror's no secret. Wendane of Agatlog's seen it. What he sees, Pyrrin learns soon thereafter. If she's a spy, she's either very unsuccessful, or very, very clever. Besides, for an artifice to have the memories Grandoon captured, someone had to create them. It would take forever, unless Pyrrin's found some new trick."

"Not forever," corrected Gowophilus. The Amulet led him to continue: "Forever is a long time. The recorded memories could be crafted with standard techniques by a single worker in a mere five months, assuming no loss of concentration, interruption for refreshment or rest, untimely disturbance, or..."

"Five months!" Vanessa's hair flowed in golden waves across her back.

"Vanessa, you forget," intruded Zoltan, "That wasn't a passive exhibit. Grandoon asked the questions, fixed the cues. How'd Pyrrin know which memories to sculpt, which shadings of emotion to give her? If she were a simulacrum, she'd need a whole library of memories, just in case. I mean, what if Grandoon asked something else?"

"I quite agree." Grandoon blew a pair of smoke rings from his pipe, then let the others wait while he watched the rings chase each other upwards. "Pyrrin could not know which memories to prepare. An artful simulacrum might recall on demand a single dream. But these were memories, sharp-engraved, in profusion. Some were recent, too. How could a simulacrum have been given memories of the city being stormed, an event still in the future? Those looked like real memories, too; sculpted dreams are almost always too refined, too uniform in the amount of detail they provide."

"Besides," said Zoltan, "Simulacra are poor combatants. But I ran simulations of her fight with Baron Morgno. We know how good he is, and how rotten her sword was. She should've lost. I mean, here..." He gestured. A projection of Elaine and the Baron appeared in the air above them, the Baron taking a mighty swing at Elaine's head. "This is the fight. It's reduced to extreme dilatory motion. Watch the sword try to shift out of the parry." Flickers of red highlighted the sword's contortions. "But she counters each of its moves. The timing on that is ..." He gestured again. Numbers appeared, marking delays between the sword's moves and her responses. "Those times aren't impossible for someone using time distortion spells. But for a normal human, they're..."

"Upper bound of the possible," interrupted Vanessa. "That is my Schema you're using to get those numbers, after all. The people I've seen who were close to that fast were -- oft as no -- accused of numbering dragons in their bloodline. But you're right; that's no simulacrum fighting."

"So she could be a person, if extraordinary. But if she were in all those places, Zoltan, someone would have seen her. Why not have the library memories searched for her likeness?" Dame Alice sounded pleased with her idea.

"For what do we search? Dame Alice, sometimes your suggestions are easier said than accomplished." Zoltan became impatient. "I'm looking for a girl, tall, with brown-blond hair, wide shoulders, and an unattractive figure? The Academy has more memory crystals than the rest of the world put together, and probably only a tenth of the women in the world fit that description. Shall we search all of them?"

"Now, Zoltan, you know I don't want you to work too hard," repeated the Dame. "Besides, you have more clues than that. After all, wouldn't most girls her age hesitate, at least a bit, before attacking a dozen armed men by herself? That's what she did in the gatehouse. Nor can most girls swim a river as wide and swift-flowing as the Tressin, especially in cape and chain mail. Most men couldn't do that. Her barriers against the Presence aren't common. Nor does the typi-

cal shield maiden have interest in books of magic."

"Yes, I guess symbolic addition isn't much of an aid to chopping people to pieces."

"Furthermore," added Grandoon, "I would not call her figure unattractive, merely ill-presented. Certainly when she appeared at my cottage three nights ago, soaked to the skin after her swim in the Tressin, I was able -- while providing her with dry garments -- to check this in great detail. She seemed to believe that events within a mage's home can occur out of his line of sight." Grandoon affected not to notice Vanessa's withering glare. "Besides, she was not reading the {\em Manual on Symbolic Addition}, she was studying the {\em Tractatus Symbolicus} -- which requires a slightly higher order of mentation."

"She's reading that?" Vanessa clapped her hands on her knees, her glare softening. "Grandoon, you just fall for every girl who pretends to be bright. That I'd like to see. Kill three assassins, swim a river in twenty pounds of armor, then grind through Treganth for after-dinner reading? You don't really believe a girl her age, and talentless too, could understand Treganth?"

"From her questions, she did. We talked long enough to be sure that they were real questions, too, not something memorized to impress me. Of course, if she saw Arburg Market in building, she'd not really be 'her age'. Why, she might be as old a crone as you are, Vanessa," He ducked as she tossed a cushion, then turned to the ArchPatriarch. "I take it the Amulet is of no aid?"

"I am, frankly, confused," answered Gowophilus. "Usually the Amulet makes everything of importance so totally clear. All the Amulet told me, that while we were experiencing her memories of the Gate Tower, is that she is the proverbial coward."

"Oh, great!" Zoltan couldn't contain himself. "The one time we really need a useless obscure fact for a clue, that thing flips its wig. She jumped 20 guards, shrugged off three assassins, was prepared to duel an Imperial Baron and a dozen retainers by herself, and It calls her a coward? What does It think a {\em brave} person would do? Renounce sharp instruments, and fight them with a wooden spoon?"

"Now, Zoltan, you are unfair. The Amulet of Alpertus Magnus only bestows those clues which Gow the Allwise allows It to entrust to us, in His Own Incomprehensible Way. Besides, the Amulet did not say that she was a coward. It said that she was literally the ultimate coward, in the proverbial sense."

"Which proverb?" asked Dame Alice.

"Alas, the proverb is apparently well-known, since the Amulet refuses to reveal which proverb was intended. As you know, Alpertus Magnus was an adherent of the Dogma of Transcendental Irrelevance -- the Revealed Truth that only obscure facts are truly of value. He created the Amulet as a symbol of his faith and piety. Since the proverb is obvious, it cannot be truly useful, so the Amulet will not lower itself by naming it."

Grandoon intruded as the ArchPatriarch faded his voice and began talking to himself. "Also, Zoltan, there were limits to what she could fight by herself. When she thought she need fight the Baron and all his retainers, she had no expectation that she might win, though her feelings seemed to be not fear in the face of death, but resignation in the face of an unpleasant duties. The Baron hurt her."

"Yes, but did he beat her?" Zoltan shook his head. "Any sending would claim human limits, whether it had them or not. We're used to seeing within, to know the heart, to tell whether someone is lying or not. How can you judge anyone whose mind is closed?"

"Common folk do," Dame Alicia answered.

"Dame Alicia, they do not! They guess, and don't trust known liars, and pay us to bond contracts, and are always marks for the crook who saves his one lie for last. Where does that leave us?"

"Perhaps," said Vanessa, "it leaves us

trying to name a proverb. Of course, for a Gowist -- an Illuminant, I should say -- there is one totally obvious proverb, that expounding the prime virtue: 'a brave man dies but once; a coward may survive a thousand deaths'. But that's hardly a literal blessing of cowardice. Elaine didn't seem to have patrons, clerical or mageborn, to bring her back if she died."

"Grandoon," asked Dame Alicia, "Can she possibly be a real person, who someone has seen and remembered? Her resistance to spellcraft could be an unusual artifact. The way people forget her might be done by a very clever spell, or a demon, though patrons able to summon demons are people we can name. I don't think Pyrrin is on that list; one of the few topics on which we agree with him is that such summonings are unwise. Could she be a dragon? They could do these things. Are they entering the affairs of men again?"

"One doesn't need dragons to have strange artifacts."

"I was thinking of her speed and endurance, not to mention healing so quickly. That wasn't conventional sorcery -- levitation spells instead of muscle. The disturbance in the Presence couldn't possibly be missed. Someone who drank enough strength elixir could duplicate her acts, but they'd burn out -- be left abed for a fortnight."

"Which she was not," noted Grandoon, "She was tired, and chilled by the river. She ate substantially and slept soundly, not more."

"From your images, she had broad shoulders, and real muscle in her arms -- which many women do not. She showed more strength and endurance than most men. That's not common." answered Vanessa.

"It has," said the ArchPatriarch, "to do with flying. Could she fly, Grandoon?"

"She swam the Tressin. Anyone who could fly would choose the faster, not to mention more comfortable, way across. It's not as though water would protect her from spellcasting. But why is flying important?"

"The Amulet reminds me in great detail of an Elector of Lys, some centuries past, a pious collector and manufacturer of enchanted machines. He built a mechanical dragon, its wings driven by stallions hidden in its belly. The machine weighed less than a dragon. Its wings were marvels of craftsmanship, duplicating properly the motions of real wings. The machine glided well, but never flew, never ascended. I conclude that some difference between natural and mechanical flight is involved."

The archmages considered the Amulet's revelation, trusting the clue but not the ArchPatriarch's interpretation. Vanessa finally spoke. "No, not flight. But there's a difference between dragons and horses. Dragons are creatures of the Presence, using its power to enhance native bone, muscle, and sinew. A few chains hold an elephant. A dragon the same size rends iron chains link from link, shatters stone cliffs with its tail, and breathes fire. The effect is like a strength potion without side-effects. Perhaps the girl is bespelled."

"And how," asked Dame Alice, "Did someone cast this spell on our young lady, if she cannot be enchanted? The notion founders on simple fact. Grandoon had glimpses within her aura, and saw no spells at work. Besides, strength spells do exhaust their recipients."

"Dragons' spells," noted Gowophilus, "do not injure their casters, however much Great Worms are fond of slumber and contemplation. Being within her own aura, Elaine could have enchanted herself. Now, as to causing someone to cast a spell on themself without leaving signs, the best method -- advocated (says the Amulet) by Harrek the Invincible -- acts even on children. One works the rune into the decor of their rooms, their ceiling and bedspread and quilt and carpet, so that no matter where they look they take that pattern into their mind. If the child has any talent at all, the method is nearly fool-proof, the child casting the spell without conscious thought."

"She was not a child. And who," asked Grandoon, "except a dragon knows the hidden spells of another dragon? She ate enough for one, and healed as quickly. Rarely do the

great worms assume human form, though I've seen it done successfully."

"Recently?" asked Dame Alicia. "Elaine had to fool not only commoners, but also competent mages."

"It's possible against the unsuspecting. You may recall a ten-year ago we had a visiting astrologer, one Michael d'Cosmaine, who one of our colleagues kept attempting to lure, I believe unsuccessfully, off to bed," answered Grandoon.

"Grandoon." Vanessa's voice was menacingly low. "I don't discuss your former girlfriends..."

"Just as well. Uh, the lack of success, I mean. Michael's transformation spell required a certain minimum of concentration, absent which -- say, if he had been excessively distracted, as by the passionate caresses of an attractive young lady -- he would resume his native form. Certainly, I can't imagine anyone wanting to share a bed with twenty tons of reptile."

"Oh, no, I don't know anyone like that," commented Vanessa.

"I remember Michael," said Dame Alice. "A well-bred young man, not given to partying or undergraduate mischief or -- he was a dragon?"

"Precisely," answered Grandoon. "Able to fool the unsuspecting. I thought it obvious. The Gatekeeper knew all along. But why would a dragon do what Elaine did? There's no motive. Assuming, of course, that she fooled me, which I doubt. I looked for that possibility. Perhaps she's human. She might have a spell that we lack. It wouldn't be the first we can't name, nor the most important."

"You're still looking for the Mayevin magebinding?" asked Zoltan.

"The most important spell in all the world, whose power would shatter the Apostate's slavocracy forever. I search but do not find. Through the binding, a mage who abused his talents felt such agony that no tonic could relieve the pain. My only clue is a fragment, remembered fifty years after the fact, by an unlettered porter who heard a conversation between two princes. But who was the 'Abbot of Inn Witte' whose secret was found by the Mayevins? Inns commonly do not have Abbots, but no inn of this title has been found."

"I wish we knew Pyrrin's plans." said Vanessa. "He usually plays several cards at once."

"If we knew all we wished, Vanessa, we'd die of boredom," chided Dame Alice. "if we knew all we wished, Grandoon could name the track of the Nightstar."

"The Nightstar," snarled Grandoon, offends against all reason. For centuries, we came closer and closer to the laws that lock the planets in their paths through the zodiac. Almost we had it. No sooner did Tegel-Sorin vanish into the Belt of Heaven than this thing appeared, moving in violent contradiction to the revealed principles of the Art."

"I still think it's enchanted," said Zoltan.

"Think as you will. No means of scrying, no mirror however polished, reveals the faintest trace of enchantment near it. Besides, Harrek the Lesser set scrying balls in perpetual circle about the earth -- to study the weather. They're still there; despite being enchanted, they follow the march of the Zodiac, their path being perturbed by semi-conjunction with Tegel-La. The Nightstar's march is oblivious to Tegel-La's presence. Now, if you're quite through rubbing salt into that wound, I do have certain scholarly obligations to perform. We'll know more on the morrow." Grandoon led his fellow archmages down from their tower.

Chapter Four (League of Democracies).

North of the Dorrance Academy, beyond the Sea of Dreams and the Lyssan Empire, across Pargana Major and its world-straddling Daurine and Taurine mountains ranges lay the lands of Pyrrin and his League. The myriad island and coastal republics of the Sea of Silence, farflung Khemai, the

hills and plains and rolling grainfields of Krefizond were all subject to his will and command. All paid tribute to him. All were intensely loyal to their Savior, the Great Shield of the People, the Sun Who Shines Both Day and Night, Long-Lived, Long-Long-Lived, Long-Long-Long-Long-Lived Pyrrin, Liberator of the East and the West, Great Supreme Commander of the Hosts of Freedom, Majestic Helmsman of the Fleets of the Liberation, High Sky Marshal of the Empyrean, and other honorifics too soporific to endure repetition.

The center of his realm was at Cartagna, tucked in a shoulder of the Khetane mountains, where stood his capital, his treasuries, his chief armories and archives. From the twelve corners of the earth, his spies and diplomats brought him intelligence about the doings of the great and small. There stood The Institute of Useful Arts, the training-center for his mages, loyal to the League, trained not in the arcane or theoretical but instead the most practical and helpful aspects of the Great Art. Here decades of ceaseless labor had converted mountains of solid granite into palaces and fortresses, a great redoubt against which the mightiest of attacking armies would hurl themselves in vain. To the west, facing the vast plains of Krefizond, were barracks and arsenals where the Legions of the League -- men and dwarves and sea-trolls and elves alike -- drilled and trained in constant readiness for their next engagement, their next opportunity to extend the Peace of the League to the distant parts of the earth.

Atop his palace, surrounded by loyal courtiers and jostling ambassadors, the archmage Pyrrin brooded on his recent victories. In Pargana Major, two decades of campaigning, of slow sieges and clever subversions, had at last given him effective control of the passes of the Chakrosh. Now, his lines of supply secured, his armies could pour through from Efryzum and Chumanium to storm the Dominion of Haigalras. Haigalras taken, the fords and bridges of the Muabbin River would be his, so that the forces of the League could sweep through the Muabbin valley, liberating a thousand towns and villages, baronies and sees from the strangulation of feudal lords and the subtle dominion of court mages. It would be one more step for freedom, one less step for government of, by, and for the archmage. The Empire of Lys would find its eastern frontier, so long at peace that its towns were unfortified, under constant attack. Now, as Fall crept over the world, Pyrrin's armies marched south, finding in their path stocked granaries and secretly prepared barracks, from which they would sally forth as soon as spring melted the snows from the Chakrosh.

Elsewhere, matters had gone badly. Arburg-am-Tressin had seemed a grape ripe for the picking. Its Duke was a fool, while its natural government, its Council of Syndics and Factors, was a ready target for subversion and manipulation. Twenty years' work had gone into preparing the city, into placing the right people in positions of authority. As Pyrrin had planned, there had been bloody revolt within Arburg. The Duke fled, while Pyrrin's fifth columnists took control. The second stage of the rebellion, in which Pyrrin's fifth columnists so degraded custom and tradition that democracy became attractive to the citizenry, had been well underway.

The Duke tried to recover his city. He summoned his levies, finagled for aid from surrounding principalities, and put Arburg to siege. That was expected, though the Duke had been surprisingly effective at raising assistance from neighbors. However, repeated simulations had shown that the siege was essentially certain to fail, especially once units of the Corps of Guards, disguised as Syndic-hired mercenaries, managed to infiltrate the town. The Corps, while trained with sword and bow, spear and pike, was primarily a corps of wizards, providing the defenders with the thaumaturgic support they would elsewise lack.

Contrary to all expectation, the siege had succeeded. Arburg's defenses fell to the first touch of pressure. How? Were there traitors

within the Guards? Had someone given the Duke a secret to shatter the northern gatetower? Witnesses were scarce. Someone had very systematically killed all the Guards in the gatetower. Now Pyrrin himself would settle the question. The Guards were dead, but their memories remained in Pyrrin's reach.

Atop a pinnacle of rock, Pyrrin's closest confidants awaited his arrival. Lord Chancellor Miraphernes, a wizened old man in draped in umber, stood by the casting circle, a small steel-bound book lying unlocked on the lectern before him. The circle itself was a disc of polished alabaster, not quite three yards across, within which glowed the faintest touch of eldritch illumination. The Chancellor repeated once again what was to be done, preparing for his task as Remembrancer for Pyrrin's casting. Lord General Blaine, a tall, attractive man wearing a grass-green doublet trimmed with brazen lace, waited on the other side of the circle, ready to view the answers his Lord provided. He had done the planning for the coup in Arburg. Upon his shoulders had fallen the greatest disappointment when Arburg remained enslaved by the mage-tyrants.

Pyrrin -- his given name remained a secret from even his closest advisors -- slipped from his sandals. He was a tall, thin man, seemingly of late middle age, with small pointed beard and long, well-waxed moustache. His tunic was a simple gray, bearing no frivolous ornament, worked on its hems only with wards of guard and aversion. His feet touched the casting circle, setting ripples of phosphorescence circling across the stone.

"Guard," he spoke. A wave of one hand created within the stone a dim circle of golden light, barely visible against the flicker of the cressets burning above each of his witnesses. Within the light swam ill-glimpsed runes, protecting the caster from the recoil of his own spells.

The Chancellor touched the first page before him, passing his fingers over a carefully inked pattern of lines, stars, and circles. The pattern's double swiftly appeared on the wall opposite. Pyrrin spoke "I name thee 'Life's Beginning'!" He made intricate gestures with his hands, bringing the pattern on the wall to glowing life, one fragment at a time. The rune was a fading of shadows, the cry of a baby's earliest breath, a seed splitting open to put forth its first delicate shoot.

Here could be seen secret of good spellcasting: teamwork gave real power. Outside the circle, Remembrancers provided the pattern of the runes, projecting them where those within the circle could see. Those within the circle, the Casters, then invoked the rune, supplying the projected rune-image with the fire of the Presence until it came to life. The Remembrancer usually provided the thoughts behind the runes, the plan of use which gave the spell its intent. The Caster's will then drove the runes to effect the Remembrancer's desires.

The Chancellor raised his hand from the page, which obediently turned, to reveal another more darkly worked pattern. The image appeared next to the first; Pyrrin's gestures brought it gradually to lurid life. "I name thee 'Life's End'" he spoke. The rune brought with it the sweet smell of the charnel house, the gentle yield of soil freshly turned over new-dug graves, the distant acid taste of fresh blood.

Once again, the Chancellor turned a page. One more rune appeared. Pyrrin, breathing more deliberately, passed his closed hands over each other, then brought them back together. "I name thee 'Life's Return'". With the rune's name came the creak of an opening coffin, a gasp of too-long-held breath, the first color of a crocus raising through March snows. Blaine, saying nothing, saw a hint of a pattern, an overall similarity between the three runes. He closed his eyes. He has seen, not clearly but all too sharply for his comfort, bits and fragments of a greater rune -- the Rune of Life's Cycle of which the runes before him were merely aspects.

"Tirmack! Tirmack Wanfogl! Come hence! I call thee!" Pyrrin spoke a name: the commander of his Guards in Arburg, slain when the Gatetower fell. Very slightly, Pyrrin's hands shook. To bring the Guard he must call the Guard's personal name-rune; Calling a Rune went far beyond Naming in the power it demanded of the caster.

A ghostly figure appeared across the circle from Pyrrin. It wore the uniform of the Guards, plum-tunicked and scarlet caped; after death the ghost assumed the dress it best knew. A sharp-sighted observer would have discerned, in the space around the ghost, a dimlit view of the Lesser Gulf of Heaven, the Death Arch spanning it, a pathway leading from the casting circle across the Arch into Elysium.

"Who calls?" spoke the ghost. "For I am beyond life, beyond all travails, enjoying eternal reward."

"It is I," spoke Pyrrin, "I thy lord and master. I, Pyrrin. Speak, show me your memories, then return to thy reward. Now tell me: The Gate Tower of Arburg. It fell! How? By whose hand?"

"I acknowledge thee, my Lord," answered the ghost, "but I know only what I saw. Someone entered the tower, or was admitted by treachery, penetrated to the dampers, and wrecked them. I did not see this person. I had left a dozen men to guard the dampers, all swordsmen of the eighth circle or higher, all but one of whom has given me his respects in Elysium. They were struck down. I give you their names. The mages in the tower, those others who fell bravely, have their own Paths among the Dead; I've seen them not."

Pyrrin dismissed his Captain, summoning instead the guards, each of whom told the same story, of fighting and being slain. The Remembrancer nodded at Pyrrin, then sent up another rune for Pyrrin to bring to life. 'The Pilgrim's Eye' gave visual form to the memories of the dead. Pyrrin's gesture empowered the rune, then brought the dead before it.

The fight in the gate-tower raged before them. A dozen guards sat in a small room, waiting for some indication of a direction or form to an attack. The doors were rune-locked; walls were bespelled. A door swung open, its locking rune shattered like plaster under a hammer. What entered could be seen only as a blur -- a region which was smeared, like an inked illustration on which hot water had fallen, so no image remained for the eye. The region leaped across the room, leaving a half dozen guards dead in its wake. Far more slowly, the guards came to their feet drew their swords. At the blur's periphery, a sword could vaguely be seen, sometimes in focus, sometimes not. After a few moments, the memories came to their end: the guards, having died, saw no more.

Pyrrin called forth more of the dead, each of whom gave the same account of their deaths. All memories of their foe were gone, so that when his spellcasting was complete Pyrrin had no better a picture of his foe than previously. An unseen swordsman, protected by the most potent sort of amulets, had swept through everything in his path, ignoring counterspells, bathing in fire barriers, slaughtering skilled warriors like so many sheep. With no more questions to ask, Pyrrin dismissed his runes, one at a time, then extinguished the circle.

"I don't understand," said Blaine. "What happened? All I could see was a ghost, a cloud of smoke and light."

"Precisely," said the Chancellor. "Who went there? Whoever he was, he stripped those who fought him of their memories, so none recall what they faced. These are the marks of a powerful sorcerer. Does the Academy now send its own archmages against us? I doubt that --- Wendane would have warned us by now."

"We fight someone unknown?" answered Blaine.

"Not precisely a new problem," remarked Pyrrin. "When your armies take the field, can you name every one of the enemy's footmen? Here someone hides. The hiding is elaborate, typical of the tyrants of the Dorrance Academy. This must by some minion of theirs. We'll urge our agents there to be more vigorous. They owe us much; we'll remind them of their dues. We'll find who it was. We already have some idea of our opponent. He downs strength potions by the quart. If he'd used spells, the wake in the Presence would have been visible.

Even so, he must be a large man, broad-shouldered. Look at that parry!" Pyrrin recalled to sight a segment of the combat. "Only the strongest of warriors could block the strikes of three opponents in a single move. That requires enormous brute strength, not just perfect timing."

"My lord," spoke the Chancellor, "I fear that we must face the afternoon audiences. The Ambassador of the Freely Associated Commonwealths had various issues to lay before you."

"I know, I know. And I know what issues, too. The Ambassador, though, is still a bore, and not a sensible one, either. Very well. But late this afternoon, the sunset review -- I will personally receive the salutes of whatever legion is making it. It's good for morale."

"That would be the Ninth, my lord," said Blaine. "Off for the Chakrosh tomorrow, too."

* * * * *

Pyrrin embassies visit. love of subjects feeling of resp. dismay at way democracies develop. What do you mean we can't just print paper money?

Pyrrin Legion reviews. Description of military equipment and its range. Pyrrin the egomaniac, who loves his citizens to worship him. ratio of mages to inf. Only so many talented. Flying carpets, sea trolls, regiment stones.

Chapter Five (Dragons, Skyborn)

The cavern was brilliantly lit by thousands of false stars, incandescent points of light strewn across its tiles ceiling. The carpetted floor was heaped with swords and rings, armor and tools and pottery and massy jewelled goblets, skins and skeletons of birds and beasts ranging from the common to the mythical to the extinct, each an archetype for its kind, each as fresh and sharp and dust-free as the day it came into existence. A competent mage would have noted that each item was bespelled, caged in a ward of temporal stasis.

Atop a granite dias, surrounded by the finest items of their collections, three Great Worms lay sharing their meditations.

``Another hundredth of a revolution [Image: the sweep of far galaxies, driven by galactic rotation across the nearer stars. *Image: the birth and* death of hot, short-lived stars, rising from the infall of cold hydrogen, igniting, soaring to brilliant life, then passing from existence, all *before* a single revolution had passed.] \{Mindset: The onrush of apparent time, Now as an ever-propagating tridimensional membrane bifurcating tetradimensional space-time, the remembered galactic rotations a many-stranded twisted rope of trajectories trailing pastwards\}", noted the largest, ``and we have a new dance." [Image: the weave of the planets across the sky, a stately galliard.] [Image: the previous cycle of close approaches, harmonies driving each other into dissonance, planetary motion slipping from quasi-periodic to pseudochaotic, minor orbital corrections made megayears ago insuring that planetary orbits restabilize so as to afford salubrious climates and especially spectacular planetary conjunctions for all parties.] \{Mindset: Apparent time as a computer, permitting with patience facile display of novel mathematical functions. Mindset: Apparent time as a barely relevant to practical considerations, life being spent on the throughways and byways of metatime. \}

``This cycle I prefer not to miss," answered the second, ``having devoted enough time to ensure that the next cycle will be as spectacular as any before it." [Image: the orbital elements of the star cluster, carefully measured, every mass determined, every motion observed, all to determine the circumsolar gravitational potential at the time of dissonance with the necessary exactitude. Image: Observatories scattered across near space, confirming the precision of the extrasolar model, confirming that the perhaps-needed supply of comets were ready to correct deviant planetary orbits, all significant traces of observatories and comets then being hidden from the system's ephemeral inhabitants] \{Mindset: Solar system as toy kaleidoscope, carefully tuned to yield the most spectacular orbital dances.\} \{Mindset: the universe as a complex albeit non-unique display tool.\}

``Thusfar the ephemerals have been most cooperative about leaving the stage undisturbed." TO BE CONTINUED

Words on the Wing

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Awarding Experience

What I want most from an experience system is regular, gradual improvement. After every session, my character should be able to improve in at least one thing. If different types of improvements cost different amounts, I should be able to buy something cheap while still saving up for something expensive. I don't particularly care for level based systems where you gain nothing for a few weeks then gain a level with everything associated with it. I have seen a couple of systems that use levels, but allow improvement between levels and those probably wouldn't be as bad, though I haven't played them. On the other hand, non-leveled systems that only give out experience at the end of a scenario would have the same problem.

The other thing that I like to have in an experience system is choice. I enjoy being able to decide whether to increase the skill I used ten times in the past session or the skill I attempted only once, but failed at a critical time. Sometimes, it can be nice to be able to improve an ability that I didn't use at all if it's important to my character concept. This is especially true in systems where characters are underpowered at start and will need to buy or increase abilities that they ought to have had already.

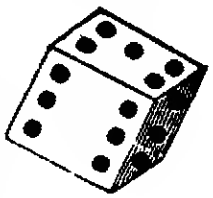
In theory, experience points should be given out for good roleplaying as this encourages desirable behavior. It's even better if points are given for merely adequate roleplaying so that the GM can dock points when someone does something blatantly out of character or unnecessarily disruptive to the group. A good use of this system would be to reward the PC who runs and hides because it is in character to do so, even though the rest of the party is spending most of the session in a major combat. Others would be to punish an honorable character who shoots a fleeing opponent in the back or a pacificist who tries to justify hitting someone with a car by closing her eyes while driving.

However, roleplaying experience often gets distributed based on whomever got the most "screen time" during the session. While those players may have been the most entertaining and the most in character, they were probably also the players having the most fun. Assuming that each characters gets his or her turn in the spotlight, something that should happen anyway, the bonus experience should even out in the end. However, I usually resent it when I get below average amounts of experience from sessions in which I didn't get to do very much. Being bored is its own punishment, I don't want to have to suffer experience-wise too.

Experience should also be given out for goal accomplishment. If a goal is particularly complex, smaller experience bonuses can be given out for sub-goals as well. This can help give players an incentive to pay attention to the plot rather than wandering off on tangents. Note, however, that this only works if you're going to continue the same campaign after completing the goals. My Iron Claw character gains no experience whatsoever if I'm playing

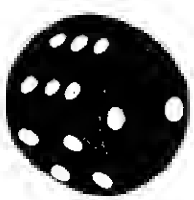
Shadow Bindings or Cosmic Synchronicity.

Unless the GM and players are more interested in hack and slash than in actual roleplaying, experience should not be given out for every thug or monster defeated, only major villains. Acquiring treasure is a reward in and of itself and does not need to be accompanied by experience point bonuses as well. The exception would be if a specific item of treasure is one of the goals of the party or, more likely, a sub-goal in a larger quest. For example, the party may need to retrieve a legendary magical weapon to slay the demons terrorizing their homeland.



Whether it is appropriate to give experience for meta-game events like telling a good joke, cooking dinner or spilling spaghetti sauce on ones shirt varies from group to group. If your primary goal is to socialize and have fun and roleplaying is a means to an end, then awarding experience to people who contribute to this is a good idea. However, if the group wishes to have their characters do things and have the in-game timeline progress at more than a snail's pace, experience should not be awarded for meta-game events. In fact, players who spend too much time discussing the latest movie they saw instead of gaming might even be docked experience points. Be careful with this, though. If the player isn't doing anything in-game because there is nothing for his character to do, coming up with something that involves his character would be more effective in returning his attention to the game.

Some GMs may wish to allow players to have some say in how experience points are divided up. In the one group I was in that tried it, having the players decide as a group was a disaster. No one could agree on anything. Giving each player a certain number of points to distribute works better. However, players are more likely to be subjective in their awards. This can be a problem if some of the players actively dislike each other. However, if all the players get along well, a tendency to award PCs who do their character a favor or punish ones who hurt them could be a good thing as it encourages the characters to cooperate.



There are some weaknesses in this system, though. Some weeks there may be three players who did something particularly outstanding while other weeks only a single player does something noteworthy. Allowing players to give out a variable number of experience points doesn't work well either, as some players may choose to always (or almost always) give out the maximum. Therefore, player chosen experience systems should be accompanied by a GM experience point award where the GM gives out more experience points on weeks when everyone does well.

If the GM gives out a flat number experience points for good roleplaying each week (whether or not it is accompanied by player awards) this can create a couple of problems. First, a player may get a point for mediocre roleplaying one week and not get one for excellent roleplaying the following week if the overall roleplaying of the entire party improves. Second, it means that characters in large parties will get fewer experience points than characters in small parties. A poor roleplayer in a group of three may average one point per four sessions while a good roleplayer in a group of six may average one point per five sessions. So a GM should always be willing to vary the total number of experience points awarded for good roleplaying, and this is especially important if the group is large.

Another method of giving out experience is to base it on what the character did during the session. For example, a mage may earn experience each time she casts a spell or a thief may earn experience by picking locks. Assuming you have honest players who

understand the system, this has an advantage of being objective and requiring the person receiving the experience to do all the paperwork regarding it. A variant of this would be to allow a small increase in a skill (or a chance at such) whenever it is used successfully. This has the same advantages, but is harder to cheat at as the GM and other players are more likely to remember whether or not you used a particular skill than how many skills you successfully used during the course of the previous session.

Minor NPCs generally should not receive experience unless it is a simple, objective system like automatically improving skills that get used. NPCs who are considered part of the party should be awarded experience for goal accomplishment and any other objective method used. They should not normally get experience for good roleplaying. However, if the primary method of determining experience for PCs is roleplaying, the GM may grant NPCs a flat award equivalent to poor or adequate roleplaying to prevent them from falling too far behind. (Of course, dependents, hirelings and other characters who are expected to be weaker than the PCs don't need this.)

Overall, I think that players who all have regular attendance and a reasonable level of roleplaying should be able to improve at roughly the same rate. Players should not be penalized for lack of participation if their characters end up not being involved in the action through no fault of their own, as often happens when the party splits up. Character growth should occur on a regular basis, even if working towards expensive or difficult to obtain abilities.

Zeus: Master of Olympus

While, on the surface, *Zeus: Master of Olympus* by Sierra Studios and Impression Games looks something like *Sim City* set in ancient Greece, it is actually more complex. It took me almost as long to go through all of the tutorials for the game as it did to play the easiest adventure. The most important difference between the two games is that *Zeus* has goals. Instead of simply trying to keep your city thriving, you have to accomplish something specific. Even in open play, you still have monsters to slay or colonies to found. However, the game will give you the option of continuing to play after you have won.

If you choose to play an adventure, you will have five to eight episodes which, put together, tell a story based on Greek mythology. Each episode has goals that you must accomplish in order to complete the episode. There is a screen that you call up which will tell you how close you are to completing each of the goals. Most of these goals are accomplished and then remain that way. However, some goals, such as having a certain population level, may fluctuate so that they have been met at the end of one month, but are no longer so by the end of the next.

Another important difference between the two games is the level of interaction with other cities in *Zeus*. Every four years, the

Olympics are held and there are competitions for actors and philosophers as well. As long as you have athletes, actors and philosophers, representatives from your city will compete. If you win the Olympics, your city can host the next game. You can set up trading routes with friendly cities or go to war with your rivals. Most of these interactions involve your citizens going off and then returning to report the results. However, when you found a colony, you get to go with the settlers to supervise the initial building, just like you did with your own city. Once the colony is functioning to your satisfaction, you can return home, leaving your governor in charge.

There are many different buildings that are available and no one city has access to them all. The additional resources that you need can be traded for, though I've never seen more than four of the seven types of food in the same game. Of course, this is not a problem since all food is considered interchangeable except for wheat which can be fed to horses as well as people. The game does have the quirk that your population is healthy and happy with being fed, regardless of how balanced their diet is. You could, for instance, feed your people nothing but onions and they'd be fine.

Goods are more complex than food. Fleece is produced by the same shepherds who watch the flock, but grapes and olives have to be made into wine and olive oil before your people can use them. Bronze can be made either into armor or sculptures. Marble and sculpture are only good for selling or building sanctuaries. Wood is used by triremes as well as sanctuaries. Interestingly enough, you don't need to know which god or goddess a sculpture is supposed to represent at the time it is created. You leave a cloth over it until it is needed then, when it is unveiled at the sanctuary, it miraculously turns out to be the one you want.

In some ways, storage and distribution is even more important than production. If your granaries on one side of the city are full, that doesn't prevent people from starving on the other side. Having more fleece than you know what to do with won't keep your people happy if they can't buy it from their local agora. Also the trading posts and piers that you use to trade with other cities are considered part of this category.

One of the things that you're allowed to do is build sanctuaries to the gods. Each adventure has particular gods who are friendly. They will show up randomly to try to convince you to worship them. Once you have a sanctuary built, the god it is dedicated to will show up more often and do things such as bless your buildings or grant other benefits. Which gods are friendly vary from adventure to adventure. A problem that I've noticed is that the artisans constructing the sanctuary frequently have trouble finding construction materials even when they are located in storehouses right next to the construction site. There are only twelve deities who take an active part in the game. While others may be mentioned in the storyline, you can't build sanctuaries to them and they won't visit your city.

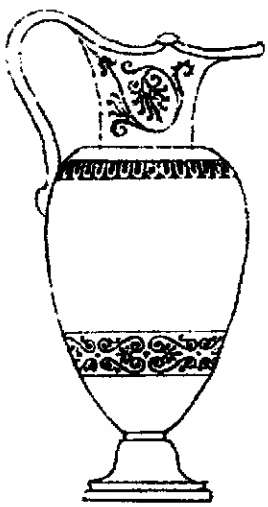
Some of the gods who aren't friendly may be actively hostile and show up to kill your citizens and to destroy some buildings and curse others. Alternatively, they might send a monster to plague your city. While hostile gods go away on their own, monsters stick around until you slay them, usually by calling a hero to take care of it. Each monster has a particular hero who can slay it, though each hero has two monsters he can slay. Heros also

have quests that they can undertake if requested by a friendly deity or they can be sent to slay monsters in other cities. Once you have a reason to call a hero, you can build a hero's hall for him which will tell you what requirements have to be met before the hero considers your city to be worthy of his presence. Heros stick around for the rest of the episode in which they are summoned and will fight on your behalf if your city is attacked.

The game includes two types of housing, common and elite. Common housing is much easier to support as it requires fewer types of goods. It also takes up less space and holds more people. However, you will usually want some elite housing for military purposes, even if it's not specifically required for one of your goals. Only elite housing can produce hoplite and horseman units. Besides being more capable in combat, these units can leave your city and fight abroad while the common rabble can only fight to defend their homes. The game contains an auto-defend option so that you can have the computer command your army if you don't wish to. This can be useful because the computer is more likely to guess correctly as to which direction the enemy will be approaching from. However, it is not perfect, and I lost a battle where I outnumbered my opponents because my troops were in the wrong location.

One thing to be careful of is that people who are taking up arms to defend your city cannot perform other work at the same time. You may suddenly discover a lack of workers, even if you normally have problems with unemployment. If you already had a shortage of workers, the service level might drop sufficiently that your houses start devolving, which compounds the problem. Luckily, the game has controls which let you prioritize the types of jobs and/or shut down production of certain goods. Just don't forget to turn them back on if you're going to need those goods again in the future.

I found a couple of bugs in the open play adventures. In the economic one, you have to found two new colonies, one that produces sheep and the other that produces bronze. The episode goals for the two colonies are reversed so that you need to send armor to the parent city from the first colony and fleece from the second. In the military one, your colony is landlocked, but the computer expects you to be able to trade with cities only accessible by sea.



There are a couple of other things I noticed which I consider more odd than bad. In economic open play, if you're paying tribute to another city or receiving tribute from another city at the time you found a colony, the annual tribute continues, but you must pay it from or receive it at the colony. Your home city, however, does not change at all until you get back from the colony. If you were building a sanctuary when you left, no work will have been accomplished on it in your absence, even if you were gone long enough to build a larger sanctuary (or even multiple sanctuaries) in your colony.

When you leave the game, the program will automatically remember where you were. That means that, even if you don't specifically save your game, you can still continue from where you left off. However, you have the option of saving whenever you want and the game has an autosave function as well. There is also the very nice feature of being able to start over from the beginning of the current episode if you mess up, rather than having to start the game over.

Aside from a couple of minor bugs, I've enjoyed playing *Zeus*. However, once you've played all the episodes of a particular adventure successfully, it is much less challenging to play it again. If the company wishes to keep people playing the game, they'll need supplements with additional adventures and, preferably, the ability to design some of

your own. Of course, I got bored with *Sim City* rather quickly. People who enjoyed that game would probably be happy with the open play modes.

Comments on Issue #41

Flutterblast

I don't consider first person point of view to be necessary to being inside the head of the main character. At least, when I write, I usually roleplay out scenes from the perspective of a particular character, but then write them in third person, though still from that character's perspective. But it's not just my work. When reading "Postcards from Alexa," it is quite obvious whether the scene is told from Alexa's or Adam's perspective, even though it is told in third person. In fact, the first three sections cover the same scenes twice, once from each point of view and the differences between them are very interesting.

Third person point of view makes it easier to switch points of view, something I find useful since I tend to have two (or more) PCs in most stories that I write. That isn't the only reason I use third person though. I think part of it is that it feels extremely weird to refer to someone else's character in first person, even ones I am running as PCs. Actually, it still feels kind of weird to be able to run Mcthos and Amanda as PCs to begin with.

The Real McCoy

I must admit that, even though I own and have read ***In Nomine***, in both the original and GURPS versions, I did not catch the reference. Of course, I wasn't actually trying to figure out the in-joke when I read it. I have my own pantheon of gods from a fantasy world that I've been working on for a while and I was doing some comparisons between them. I thought it was interesting that some of my good gods had the same or similar spheres of influence as some of your evil gods.

The alternate universe where the archangels and demon princes ended up as deities sounds like something it would be interesting to play with. Without God and the Devil, I don't think they'd line up as two separate pantheons though. Generally, if a culture acknowledges their evil deities as gods, equal in power to their good deities, they'd all be considered part of the same pantheon, just with a lot of infighting. Actually, making them all one pantheon makes it easier for a good god and an evil god to form a temporary alliance or for a person to worship one of the evil gods without considering themselves evil.

Confessions Of A Novice GM

Installment #1

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On Experience

About six month ago, I started GMing for the first time ever. Our regular Gm wanted to take some time to be a player, and I, with the bravery of someone who has no idea what he's getting into, volunteered to run something.

So I chose a genre, a setting, a campaign style, a rules system. And then, of course, I started hacking away at the rules system to make it fit what I wanted better.

I chose to use Steve Jackson Games' GURPS system, but I wasn't terribly impressed with the experience point system. "Just give people points at the end of the session? What if I screw up?" (Okay, so I wasn't all *that* brave about GMing). "Look," I thought, "I know that I have responsibility for this game, but I don't know how I'm going to go about handing out experience. Will I reward problem-solving? Roleplaying? Tough acting challenges? Stupid puns? What are experience points for anyway? Making the game fun? Acting in character?"

"What do *I*, as the GM, want from this? What do I want to reward?"

I went poking through all of my other game systems, looking for inspiration. I started reading all the "How to GM" sections in every game system I own.

I figured out that experience points are, in part, a bribe for a GM to give their players in order to convince them to act in certain ways. And I wasn't terribly comfortable with that; as a GM, I don't like trying to influence my players' actions. I'm in charge of NPCs and the world and so forth, but they are in charge of themselves. Yet I didn't want to get rid of experience entirely, because I know that some of the people I game with really enjoy watching their characters become more powerful, and enjoy the process of earning the right to become more powerful.

And them I found inspiration. In Teenagers From Outer Space.

TFOS included a factor in an experience point system I hadn't previously considered – democracy. In TFOS, one suggested way to give out experience was to give every player a chance to vote on how well they felt everyone did. Everybody would be given four little slips of paper with the numbers 0 to 3 on them. Each player, and the GM, would cast a ballot for how many points a particular player should get. Then the GM would average the points, rounding down to the nearest integer, and give that player that many points.

The idea intrigued me. First, it would take some of the responsibility out of my hands and put it into the players'. Given the gut-wrenching terror that the concept of GMing inflicted on me, any reduction on the number of way I could personally screw up the game was welcome. Second, it would give more power to the players, letting them be partners in the meta-game function of allowing characters to grow more powerful.

But I didn't particularly like the "voting" method in TFOS. The "averaging" method seemed, to me, to make each player's contribution less significant. And, as the GM, I wanted my contribution to be no more significant than a players, but to be somehow different than theirs. I wanted to make sure that players couldn't just vote everyone the highest possible experience – I wanted players to have to take the process seriously and make choices. I knew that, while the idea of having player involvement in granting experience was something I wanted to keep, voting and averaging wasn't the method I wanted to use.

So I came up with something different.

The GURPS Basic Set suggested awards in the range of 0-5 points per character per session, 1-2 points for most sessions, 3-4 for sessions in which the GM wished to reward the players, and 5 points for exceptional roleplaying, skill, luck, cleverness, and so forth. So I decided to attempt to make my system return results with a similar distribution.

First, every character gets one point as a base – this has become known as the "one point for breathing." Each session, I choose one player to give one point to – the "GM's point." The rest of the experience awarded is in the hands of the players.

Every session, each player is given a stack of eight cards showing the character's names (reproduced in Figure 1). At the end of the session, each player gives the GM two cards. The GM sorts the cards and gives them out to the player of each character.

Each card is worth a half a point.

So, if all eight players gave someone a card, and I gave the GM's point to that same person, they could theoretically get 1 point for showing up, 1 point fro me, and 8 half-points, for a total of 6 points in one session. Of course, it's terribly rare for players to get more than four cards or so, so the actual normal range is around 1 to 3 points, right where I want it.

So, the system has been working to give the distribution of points that I felt appropriate for the campaign and genre. But how well does the system work *as an experience point system?* Does the system reward what we wish it to reward, encourage what we wish it to encourage? And most importantly, does it lead to more fun for all concerned?

In implementing this system, we made a conscious decision that we would not limit the reasons someone could give a card to someone else. Our rule is, "You want to give a card

based on who solved problems, or roleplayed well, that's fine. You want to give a card based on who cooked or who you most want to sleep with, that's fine too."

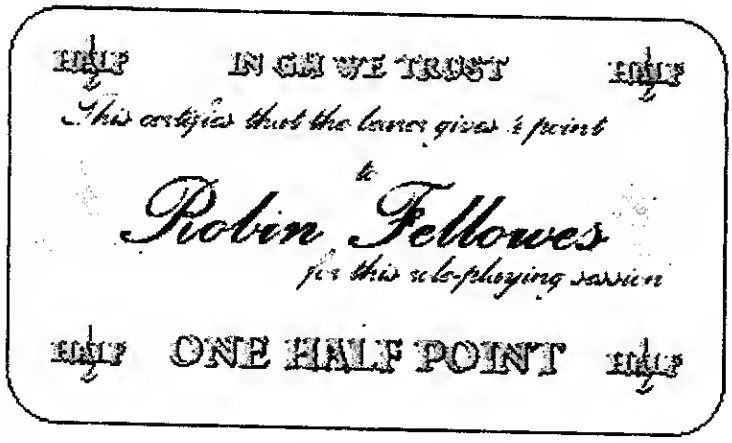

Figure 1

In making this choice, we realized that we were opening the system up to a great deal of potential abuse. After all, most of the people in the group are married to or dating other people in the group – we had no way of preventing people from always giving a card to their lover. As a matter of fact, we explicitly permitted that possibility. So far, however, it doesn't seem to have caused any great problems.

So what does the system reward? To put it simply, a democractic experience system rewards what the players want it to reward.

This has all sorts of interesting ramifications. For instance, flamboyance and "grabbing screen time" does attract attention, and can net a player a lot of cards once or twice. However, because that takes attention away from other players, if a player *consistently* hogs center stage, he or she could find other players' rewards dropping off as other players tire of it.

Similarly, I've found that, as GM, I can only focus on one or maybe two "scenes" at a time. Since my gaming group tends to have multiple in-character conversations occurring simultaneously, and may have three or four scenes occurring at the same time, I can't watch everything, or reward everything appropriately. The players' card awards can reflect important, but subtle character interactions of which I am unaware.

Another benefit we've noticed of this system is that it encourages players to pay attention to other characters, if they're not doing anything themselves. Each player feels obligated to notice the neat things the other players are doing, in order to reward them. . This makes the group less fragmented than it might otherwise be.

It also allows me, as the GM, to judge how much opportunity particular characters have for "showing off". If I notice that a player has gotten no cards for a session, that is a sigh

to me that the character in question has nothing to do, and I, as GM, need to give that character more opportunities to shine.

Of course, the system has a downside, as well. One of the most obvious is that the players are set up in competition to each other – any card someone else gets is a card you don't. But this hasn't become an issue for our group at least; I suspect that most of the players don't see it in those terms.

It also has some mechanical difficulties. Sometime during the evening, someone needs to sort out a stack of sixty-four little cards into eight piled of eight, or if a player hasn't shown up, seven piles of seven with leftover cards. That's time consuming and annoying. I usually make my wife do it.

The most significant problem, of course, is that it's not easy to decide to whom to grant a reward to from a limited and constant pool of points. In a standout game where all players were at the top of their games, how do you choose only two cards?

Some nights, people are brilliant, the in-character dialogue could have been written by Joss Wheaton, the characters come up with plots that put John LeCarre to shame, and heroism and wit sparkles. Some nights, people show up, play with the cat, nearly fall asleep, and eat pizza. In this system, the same number of total points are awarded on each night, a significant weakness.

Nonetheless, the process of voting has been, itself, fun, and, all in all, I'm glad that we're making this experiment in communal experience point awards.

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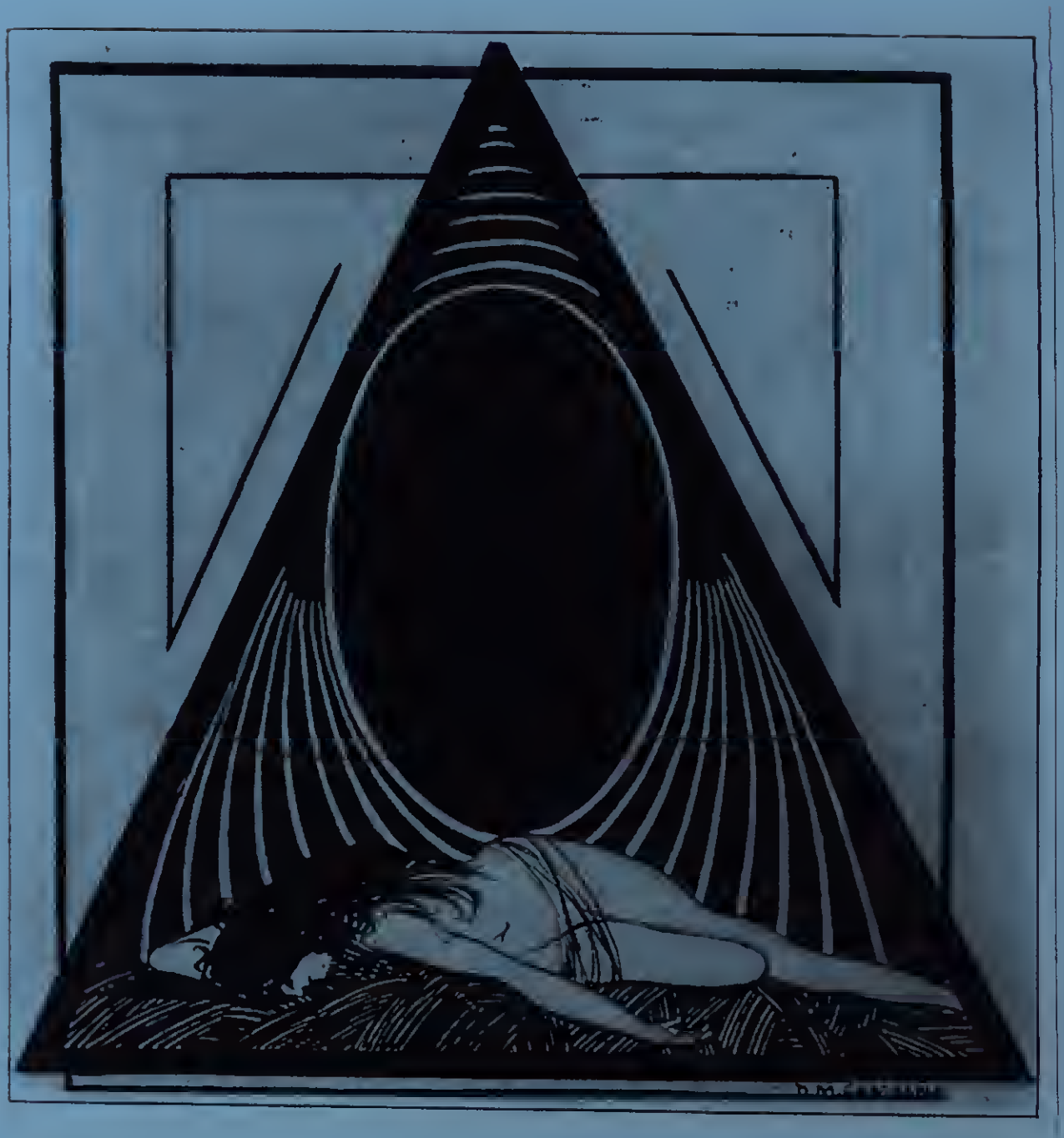

In the darkness of future past
The Magician longs to see.
One chants out between two worlds,
"Fire, walk with me."
- David Lynch, Twin Peaks